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“DIREFUL VENGEANCE”:
A U.S.-MEXICAN WAR MASSACRE AND THE CULTURE OF COLLECTIVE
VIOLENCE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY NORTH AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

Traditional military and political histories have tended to dominate historical scholarship on the U.S.-Mexican War. Despite a few notable recent publications, the input of social and cultural historians has been extremely limited. Several scholars over the last three decades—notably Robert Johannsen, Paul Foos, and Amy Greenberg—have drawn attention to the prevalence of non-sanctioned violence outside of organized combat during the war. These incidents ranged from petty theft and vandalism to rape, murder, and occasional mass killings. Scholars have offered some speculation on the social and cultural forces driving these acts, but they remain a peripheral and largely unexplored element of the war’s history. Politicians, veterans, and the American press fiercely debated the truth and significance of non-sanctioned violence and directly contested its popular memory.

This thesis presents an in-depth case study of perhaps the best-documented incident of non-sanctioned violence during the war: the killing of a group of unarmed Mexican civilians by American volunteers near the Mexican city of Saltillo in 1847. Using theory on collective memory, the study traces the rapid proliferation of multiple versions of the massacre, analyzing the ways in which various authors represented and understood it. It also connects the killings to broader historical trends in the United

States—most notably collective social violence, Indian warfare, and the myth of the frontier—to show this incident as the extension of older cultures of violence.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The winter of 1847 was misery for American soldiers in northern Mexico. Not yet a year into the U.S.-Mexican War, dreams of adventure and conquest met the reality of a monotonous occupation. Widespread disease, bitter conflict within the ranks, and a worsening pattern of reciprocal violence against Mexican civilians and guerrilla forces left many soldiers disgusted and disillusioned. In early February, Maj. Gen. Zachary Taylor began gathering his forces at a small village south of Saltillo called Agua Nueva in anticipation of a northbound Mexican army. It was here that these long-simmering tensions at last boiled with the discovery of a body.¹

On February 9, 1847, a group of American volunteers recovered the remains of Pvt. Samuel H. Colquitt, of the Arkansas Regiment of Mounted Volunteers. Having ventured out alone, Colquitt was lassoed by the neck, dragged behind a horse for several hundred yards, and left dead or dying several miles from the American camp. The

¹ K. Jack Bauer, *The Mexican War, 1846-1848* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 201-209. In the U.S.-Mexican War, as in most large-scale American conflicts before the 20th century, U.S. forces mostly comprised locally-raised volunteer troops serving on short term enlistments. These men supplemented a thinly stretched and chronically under supported professional army. Volunteer troops consistently showed disdain for regular army soldiers and leadership, bitterly resisting attempts to impose discipline. Infectious diseases wreaked havoc on American troops both in Mexico and in stateside camps. The majority of American wartime casualties died from disease rather than in combat. James M. McCaffrey, *The Army of Manifest Destiny: The American Soldier in the Mexican War, 1846-1848* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 15-34, 52-65.

following morning, a small party of Arkansan volunteers rode out seeking revenge. Their brutal reprisal upon a group of unarmed Mexican men in the nearby mountains became one of the most infamous events of the war.²

The killings at Agua Nueva were not an anomaly, but merely one episode in an epidemic of non-sanctioned violence by American volunteers throughout the U.S.-Mexican War.³ These violent acts outside of organized combat ranged from petty theft and vandalism to rape, murder, and occasional mass killings. Scholars have offered limited attempts to understand this trend but, like the war itself, it remains under-studied. The killings at Agua Nueva have particularly vexed historians largely because of the wide disparity in detail between accounts of the massacre. Most have dismissed this issue by using just a small fraction of the available source base, usually focusing on later secondhand accounts. However, the full body of primary source evidence reveals two distinct versions of the story. One is an immediate version, appearing in promptly-

² While most secondary sources refer to the massacre as “Agua Nueva” (the location of the American Camp), the actual killings occurred several miles away at a place called variously, “Catana,” “Catanna,” and “Ojo del Agua de Catana” (literally, “Eye of Water of Catana”). See Zachary Taylor to The Adjutant General, June 4, 1847; Letters Received by the Office of the Adjutant General (Main Series), 1822-1860 (National Archives Microfilm Publication M567, Roll 0362); Records of the Adjutant General’s Office, 1762 – 1984; Record Group 94; National Archives Building, Washington D.C. Also see Isaac Smith, *Reminiscences of a Campaign in Mexico an Account of [sic] the operations of the Indiana Brigade on the line of the Rio Grande and Sierra Madre, and a vindication of the volunteers against the aspersions of officials and unofficials* (Indianapolis: Chapman & Spann, 1848) 43, 78. To avoid confusion, this essay will follow the lead of previous scholars and use the name, “Agua Nueva.”

³ In this essay, the term “non-sanctioned violence” refers to violent acts outside of organized military operations. Other scholars have used the term “atrocity” to describe these incidents. See Paul Foos, *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair: Soldiers and Social Conflict during the Mexican-American War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 113-137. However, subjectivity, loaded connotations, and the implication that wartime violence can be un-atrocious make that term problematic. For the differences between sanctioned and non-sanctioned violence, see Randall C. Forsberg “Socially-Sanctioned and Non-Sanctioned Violence: On the Role of Moral Beliefs in Causing and Preventing War.” In *Peace Studies: Critical Concepts in Political Science*, edited by Matthew Evangelista, Vol. 1. (Oxon: Routledge, 2005), 172-206. This framework is not dichotomous; sanction is often a dynamic and shifting phenomenon. As Forsberg shows, acts of violence are often sanctioned by certain subjects, while simultaneously condemned by others. This was the case with numerous acts of violence analyzed in this essay.

recorded firsthand eyewitness accounts. The other is a rapidly developed and fast-spreading secondhand version fed by rumor, assumption, and the distorting forces of culture, politics, and collective memory.⁴ Written traces of the latter appeared within days of the killings and made their way to nationwide publication in less than two months. As a result, they effectively overshadowed the unpublished firsthand version in the popular memory. Although many details changed over the course of these multiple tellings, the most important distortion was that of the massacre's death toll. It began as low as four in early reports, but quickly climbed as high as thirty. After distinguishing between these two very different versions of events, Agua Nueva becomes a valuable case study. The changes over time across various accounts of the massacre shed light on the cultural forces that not only drove acts of non-sanctioned violence in Mexico but also shaped American understandings of those acts. Whether defending or condemning the massacre, American writers interpreted, structured, and rationalized the killings using pre-existing understandings of violence.

The Agua Nueva massacre is a useful example of non-sanctioned violence for several reasons. Most importantly, it generated particularly rich documentation. Dozens of primary sources include original or copied accounts of the killings. They offer the

⁴ Modern theorists understand memory as a continual process through which individuals actively re-organize and develop subjective understandings of the past. Individual memory does not exist in a vacuum and is continually influenced by the related experiences, beliefs, and impressions of others. This phenomenon, known as "collective memory," can often distort events as individuals attempt to place their own personal recollections into a larger group narrative. A similar effect occurs on a larger scale as cultures develop "historical memory." Often, the resulting distortions are subtle and largely a matter of perspective. Sometimes, however, original events can become twisted nearly beyond recognition, as in the case of the Agua Nueva massacre. See Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 22-87. The concept of "popular memory" analyzes the formation of collective and historical memories as a hegemonic process through which multiple, often contradictory, sets of meanings compete over time to form dominant narratives. See Popular Memory Group, "Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method," in *Making Histories: Studies in History-Writing and Politics*, ed. Richard Johnson et al. (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 205-215.

voices of individuals from a wide range of political, regional, and cultural backgrounds. The wealth of perspective and detail in these sources enables a far more complex reconstruction than most other examples would permit. Additionally, Agua Nueva is well known to historians of the U.S.-Mexican War. Most general studies published since the mid-twentieth century have included at least some mention of the incident. It has also received attention in more broadly focused histories as well.⁵ Lastly, Agua Nueva was an act of violence by an Arkansan—not a Texan—volunteer unit. This distinction is crucial because, while Texan volunteers entered the war with a preceding history of violent conflict against Mexico, most other American soldiers were encountering the Mexican people for the first time. The historical memory of the Texas revolution clearly influenced the beliefs and expectations of many American soldiers, but it was not a lived experience for most.

Historiography

The U.S.-Mexican War's non-sanctioned violence is just one aspect of the war's generally underdeveloped historiography. The conflict's obscurity is due in large part to the Civil War's dominating presence in American historical memory, both past and present. Additionally, the conflict's expansionist goals and racist tone fit awkwardly into American nationalist narratives. It was not until 1919 that the war received any significant scholarly attention. Even then, historians limited its importance to tactical and

⁵ See Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press), 771; Rodolfo Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, 4th ed. (New York: Longman, 1988), 52.

strategic military lessons as well as its formative influence upon future Civil War leaders, developing a triumphalist narrative.⁶ Non-military historians remained nearly silent on the war until the 1980s.⁷ The last twenty years have seen a slight increase in scholarship, but that expansion has yielded barely a half-dozen major monographs. While each of these studies has made important contributions to history's understanding of the war, much work remains unfinished.

Justin Smith's 1919 study, *The War with Mexico* offered the first significant academic history of the war. Though bibliographically immense, Smith's work clearly reflects the limitations of early twentieth-century methodology and the political biases of his time and place.⁸ It considers primarily diplomatic and military factors to present the war as a set of valuable lessons as well as an example of American heroism and honor. One present day historian has characterized Smith's book as "celebratory...suffused with racism and his desire to justify America's part" in the conflict. Several other military histories of the 20th century offer more balanced studies, but tend to follow from Smith's work. Smith briefly considered non-sanctioned violence, but segregated this discussion—along with most other non-military issues—in the second volume of his study, separate from his main narrative of the war itself. For Smith, these acts stemmed from a combination of poor discipline, idleness, alcohol, and Mexican provocation. He

⁶ Justin H. Smith, *The War with Mexico* (New York: Macmillan, 1919).

⁷ Several articles appeared in the mid-twentieth century that offered limited analysis of some social factors such as the influence of American churches, Anti-Catholicism, and American racism; however, these studies are narrow and generally detached from the war itself. For the first cultural history of the war, see Robert Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

⁸ "It may be safely estimated that the author examined personally more than 100,000 manuscripts bearing upon the subject, more than 1200 books and pamphlets, and also more than 200 periodicals, the most important of which were studied, issue by issue, for the entire period." Smith, *The War With Mexico*, viii.

was eager to deflect responsibility away from American volunteers, explaining for instance,

To a large extent, if we leave the Texans out of the account, the Mexicans themselves were responsible for the worst outrages at Monterey and the vicinity. They sold liquor to the troops persistently, and retaliated indiscriminately for the excesses that resulted. The Americans then took vengeance, and in the end some ghastly deeds on a rather large scale occurred. Singularly enough, too, the punctiliousness of our officers contributed to the same end. They would not convict a Mexican without legal proof of this guilt, and when soldiers saw a man, who was almost certainly the murderer of their comrade, let off because a drove of Mexicans testified to an alibi, they were likely to steal out after him or make some one else pay his forfeit.

Such explanations reflect a tendency to interpret and justify such violence as American volunteers themselves did, accepting community certainty as proof of victims' guilt and collapsing the social complexity of northern Mexico into a singular other.⁹

K. Jack Bauer's 1974 book, *The Mexican War, 1846-1848*, offered a more concise military and diplomatic history of the war. While far more objective than its predecessor, Bauer's study built largely on Smith's groundwork. Echoing the language of nineteenth-century expansionism, Bauer characterized the conflict as "an unavoidable war," stating that, "the whole thrust of America's physical and cultural growth carried her inexorably westward toward the setting sun and the Great Ocean." His approach strongly reflected the influence of contemporary events, most notably the Vietnam conflict. For Bauer, the history of the U.S.-Mexican war was again a source of lessons—an exemplary limited war successfully waged despite widespread popular opposition. The context of the Vietnam era perhaps explains his more significant and integrated discussions of non-sanctioned violence and guerrilla warfare, merged seamlessly into the book's main

⁹ Ibid, 2:213; Amy S. Greenberg, *A Wicked War: Polk, Clay, Lincoln, and the 1846 U.S. Invasion of Mexico* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), xvi.

narrative.¹⁰ His analysis of the Agua Nueva massacre consults nearly every known soldier's account of the incident as well as the Army's official report, a source all but ignored by later scholars. However, Bauer blamed non-sanctioned violence in northern Mexico simply on General Taylor's inability or unwillingness to discipline his volunteers, ignoring the possible influence of non-military factors.¹¹

Robert Johannsen's 1985 book, *To the Halls of the Montezumas* offered the first cultural history of the U.S.-Mexican war, examining contemporary American perceptions of the conflict. Johannsen included a mention of Agua Nueva as part of a general discussion of the conduct of American troops. He explained the Arkansas Volunteers' reputation for brutality and discussed the widely publicized nature of the massacre. Johannsen's study characterized the killings primarily as an act of retaliation against Mexican guerrilla tactics, situating them within a larger trend of reciprocal violence in northern Mexico. Focusing on the American press, Johannsen argued that reports of non-sanctioned violence had a limited effect on perceptions of the war. "Such episodes," he explained, "were always viewed as exceptional; by condemning them quickly and forcefully, Americans reinforced their view that the war was indeed fought in a humane manner."¹²

James McCaffrey's 1992 book offers a similar treatment of the massacre. Modeled after Bell I. Wiley's scholarship on Civil War soldiers, *The Army of Manifest Destiny* explores the motivations, expectations, and experiences of the common U.S.

¹⁰ Bauer, 208-209.

¹¹ David Clary, *Eagles and Empire: The United States, Mexico, and the Struggle for a Continent* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2009), 268-269. Clary cites the commission report in an extremely brief mention of Agua Nueva, but overwhelmingly favors Chamberlain's version. He provides no significant analysis of the killings.

¹² Johannsen, 36-37.

soldier in Mexico. McCaffrey discusses Agua Nueva in an analysis of the Army's attempts to discipline unruly volunteers. Throughout this section, he notes the impact of racism in both crimes and punishments. McCaffery only briefly summarizes the massacre, however, falling back on previous scholars' interpretations. He cites Agua Nueva as an example of American crimes gone unpunished, as the Army struggled to develop an effective military justice system for its first foreign war.¹³

Paul Foos's *A Short, Offhand, Killing Affair* provides the most detailed analysis of non-sanctioned violence to date. As part of a larger study of racial, ethnic, and class tensions among American soldiers in Mexico, Foos examines the wide range of "atrocities" perpetrated by American volunteers. He presents these acts as a response to unfulfilled expectations. Foos argues that recruitment efforts made promises of easy conquest and plunder. When the wartime experience failed to meet those expectations, volunteers lashed out in bouts of racially, religiously, and nationally-justified violence to collect "the wages of Manifest Destiny" for themselves. Additionally, Foos notes the importance of community bonds and group identity, which facilitated atrocity and sheltered perpetrators within tight-knit and often locally-organized volunteer companies. He explains, "Atrocity was a social phenomenon developing in tandem with the volunteer process, which brought together men and communities ostensibly in celebration of republican principles and acquisitive nationalism." However, like previous authors, Foos portrays Agua Nueva primarily as an act of retaliation and relies entirely on secondhand sources.¹⁴

¹³McCaffrey, 124-125.

¹⁴Foos, 113-114, 124.

Brian DeLay's *War of a Thousand Deserts* represents perhaps the most significant work of trans-national scholarship on the U.S.-Mexican War. DeLay's study illuminates the previously overlooked history of partisan violence between independent Indian groups and a racially diverse population of Mexican citizens that preceded and overlapped with the U.S. invasion. These conflicts, beginning decades before the war itself, depopulated and destabilized the region and greatly strained relations between central Mexico and its northern states. Additionally, DeLay shows the influence of these conflicts on American perceptions of northern Mexico leading up to the war. *War of a Thousand Deserts* takes the first step towards connecting the U.S. invasion with the cultural landscape and social history of Mexico's northern borderlands.¹⁵

Amy Greenberg's *A Wicked War* provides the first in depth consideration of the U.S.-Mexican War's home front and protest movement—elements of crucial importance to understanding Agua Nueva and its imprint on the historical memory. Greenberg analyzes the ways in which a bitterly outspoken anti-war press spun Agua Nueva and incidents like it. She argues that the massacre “was a key turning point in the reporting of the war,” showing that a steady stream of atrocity stories combined powerfully with high casualty reports to severely dampen popular support for the war. However, due to her focus on the press, Greenberg’s narrative of Agua Nueva also relies on secondhand accounts. Perhaps most importantly, Greenberg presents the conduct of American soldiers in Mexico as an extension of a uniquely American culture of violence, “forged in

¹⁵ Brian DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Wars and the U.S.-Mexican War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

battle against Britain and the Indian inhabitants of North America, and honed through chattel slavery.”¹⁶

Outline

Throughout its three main chapters, this study uses the Agua Nueva massacre to examine the cultural roots and broader historical context of non-sanctioned violence in the U.S.-Mexican War. It explores the development of that trend over the course of the U.S. army’s campaigns and occupations in northern Mexico and examines the ways in which various groups incorporated non-sanctioned violence into broader frameworks of meaning. Chapter two, “Antecedents,” explores the cultural roots of non-sanctioned violence. It connects those acts to pre-existing cultures of violence in the antebellum United States, particularly collective social violence, Indian warfare, and frontier mythology. The chapter shows both cultural as well as tangible human links between non-sanctioned violence and those earlier forms. Numerous individuals surrounding the Agua Nueva massacre personally lived these older cultures of violence—especially Indian warfare. Chapter two also uses an 1835 account of a mass killing in Vicksburg, Mississippi, to highlight modes of representation and chains of action common to both pre-war and wartime collective violence. During the war, these beliefs and behaviors visibly shaped acts of non-sanctioned violence and influenced the ways in which American writers structured, rationalized, and politicized those acts.

¹⁶ Greenberg, *A Wicked War*, 194-195, xviii.

Chapter three, “Volunteers,” follows the U.S. Army’s Central Division through its campaigns and occupations in the northern Mexican state of Coahuila between October of 1846 and February of 1847, focusing on the units directly involved in the Agua Nueva massacre, the Arkansas Regiment of Mounted Volunteers and the Second Illinois Foot Volunteers. It analyzes the development of two interrelated patterns of violence during the campaign. The first was a set of conflicts between and within various factions of the U.S. army. In addition to conditioning actions and expectations, these conflicts solidified group identity within volunteer factions and served as a site in which to rehearse patterns of action and representation visible in violence against Mexicans. The second pattern of violence was a worsening exchange of reciprocal violence between U.S. volunteers and Mexican civilians and guerrilla forces. In the course of this exchange, initially positive interactions rapidly degraded into a lethal exchange against a dimly understood enemy. Chapter three analyzes the impact of campaign conditions, conceptions of masculinity and legitimate violence, and racism upon both sets of conflicts.

Chapter four, “Massacre,” focuses on the Agua Nueva massacre and its aftermath. In addition to reconstructing the incident itself, the chapter traces the production and spread of various first- and secondhand accounts of the killings to show the ways in which the collective and popular memories of the massacre changed and solidified over the course of several months and faded almost entirely by the outbreak of the American Civil War. Authors shifted details and re-structured narratives, situating the killings within preexisting schemas of violence. Whether they wrote to condemn or defend the volunteers’ actions, presenting Agua Nueva in familiar terms allowed them and their audiences to more easily rationalize and understand the massacre.

A brief post-script discusses the broader historiographical significance of this study and the unanswered questions it raises. In particular, it speculates on the relationship between wartime non-sanctioned violence and later animosity and conflict in the borderlands, calls for the development of a truly trans-national and bilingual scholarship on the U.S.-Mexican war, and examines the need to analyze the war in its context as the first significant cross-cultural interaction between the peoples of Mexico and the United States.

CHAPTER II

ANTECEDENTS

“This is the last account! If true, a more barbarous, a more infamous, lawless, and blood stained act, has never disgraced the history of civilization. The murderers ought to be brought to condign punishment, for the honor of the American name.”¹

In early July, 1835, a spasm of violence shook Mississippi. Nationwide, the press struggled to disentangle accounts of at least three separate incidents, while simultaneously condemning or defending the culture of collective social violence so shockingly visible throughout the United States that summer. In Madison County, near the center of the state, terrified citizens convinced of a slave insurrection plot burned alive or hanged dozens of innocent victims, both black and white. One hundred miles to the northwest in the town of Deer Creek, a disagreement between two groups of men turned violent, leaving four dead and one badly wounded. Meanwhile, down the river in the booming port of Vicksburg, the town militia company backed by several hundred local citizens hanged five alleged professional gamblers. One newspaper reported “that in

¹ “Tragedy at Vicksburg,” *Richmond (VA) Daily Whig*, July 7, 1835.

consequence of the difficulties among the gamblers insurrectionists and others, twenty six persons, white and black, suffered death in the State of Mississippi” on July 6 alone.²

A close analysis of these events, particularly the Vicksburg mob, illustrates clear patterns of action and representation surrounding collective social violence in the antebellum United States. These same patterns reappeared throughout the era and would accompany American volunteers to northern Mexico in 1846. Indeed, numerous cultural antecedents visibly shaped non-sanctioned violence and its representation during the U.S.-Mexican War. This chapter will examine the three most influential of those antecedents: collective and individual social violence, frontier mythology, and Indian warfare. Each formed a crucial part of what sociologist Ann Swidler has called the “cultural tool kit” that American volunteers brought with them to Mexico. Cultural forces would shape actions and accounts at Agua Nueva just as they did in Mississippi nearly twelve years earlier.³

² *Southern Patriot* (New Orleans, LA), July 23, 1835. For detailed accounts and differing interpretations of the Madison County (Livingston) Mississippi insurrection scare, see David Grimsted, *American Mobbing, 1828-1861* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 144-156; Joshua Rothman, *Flush Times and Fever Dreams: A Story of Capitalism and Slavery in the Age of Jackson* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 17-153; Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 46-72. For other historians’ treatments of the 1835 Vicksburg mob, see Grimsted, 12; Christopher Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 27-35; Michael J. Pfeifer, *The Roots of Rough Justice: Origins of American Lynching* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 17-19; Rothman, 157-206. Waldrep offers a particularly detailed reconstruction of the story’s nationwide diffusion and the press’s reactions to it.

Rothman provides a near exhaustive study of Vicksburg, analyzing events, representations, and memory.

³ Swidler’s essay offers a more graceful alternative to earlier models that explain culture’s influence on behavior in terms of values. She argues instead that culture acts as “a ‘tool kit’ of symbols, stories, rituals, and world views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems.” Researchers can analyze the causal effects of culture by observing “‘strategies of action,’ persistent ways of ordering action through time.” She is careful to emphasize that the causal relationship between culture and behavior is not direct; culture does not determine behavior, but powerfully influences it by providing the “cultural components that are used to construct strategies of action.” Ann Swidler, “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,” *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 2 (1986): 273-274. In discussing the influence of collective social violence and Indian warfare upon the behavior of American volunteers in Mexico, I will follow the lead of historian Helen McLure and rely mainly on Swidler’s model; see Helen

Collective and Individual Social Violence

Historian David Grimsted cites the summer of 1835 as a particularly significant peak in antebellum American mob violence, arguing that after that year, cultural trends of violence nationally had solidified. “By year’s end, two sectional systems of, and attitudes toward, social violence were in place that would mark and deepen all future North-South confrontations.” Grimsted’s *American Mobbing, 1828-1861* places the violence in Mississippi that year into a broad spectrum of social violence visible throughout the antebellum era. His study analyzes a database of 1,218 documented incidents to identify clear cultural patterns. Although collective social violence featured prominently in all parts of the antebellum United States, Grimsted shows numerous differences between northern and southern forms. Whereas in the North, most fatalities occurred among rioters themselves when government authorities intervened, the bodies left in the wakes of southern riots usually belonged to the mobs’ targets. He explains, “In the South, social violence of most kinds was only rarely repressed or punished, so it became a tolerated, even a sanctioned mode of social control.” In many cases, government authorities even openly participated. This community sanction—combined with a not-inconsiderable

McLure “I Suppose You Think Strange the Murder of Women and Children”: The American Culture of Collective Violence, 1652-1930” (PhD dissertation, Southern Methodist University, 2009), 29-30. For examining the influence of all three main cultural antecedents—particularly frontier mythology—upon understandings, representations, and justifications of that behavior, I will blend Swidler’s model with the composite theoretical framework used in Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization 1800-1890* (New York: Atheneum, 1985) 21-26. See Chapter 2, note 13.

quotient of fear—sanctified both the justice of mobs’ actions as well as their specific visions of truth; to contest either could invite lethal consequences.⁴

Scholars have offered a range of explanations for collective social violence, using it as a lens into various facets of American society. While Grimsted connects mob violence primarily to public unrest over slavery, showing riots as a social safety valve for the resulting tensions, Michael Pfeifer’s *The Roots of Rough Justice* places collective social violence within a long struggle between competing models of American jurist prudence. In his study of postbellum lynch law’s roots, Pfeifer explains that vigilante justice existed as a parallel system to constitutional due process dating back to the United States’ colonial origins. Especially in the South and West, where state judicial systems were less developed and slaveholding culture emphasized the ideals of patriarchal social mastery, localized societies favored the decisiveness of community-administered punishment.⁵ However, in examining the case of the 1835 Vicksburg mob and others, an additional function of collective social violence becomes clear: the solidification of group identity.⁶

⁴ Grimsted, 13, viii-ix, 86, 110. Additionally, Grimsted characterizes southern extralegal violence as significantly more spectacular and sadistic than its northern counterpart, explaining that “sadism, ordinary or extraordinary, was an element in about a quarter of Southern mobs.” This behavior ran the gamut from burnings alive and beheadings, to the feeding of victims to animals and, in one case, a game of kickball played with a victim’s severed head. *Ibid.*, 16. For the sake of coherent historiographical engagement, this essay will anachronistically define “the South” as the future Confederate State of America. For an insightful critique of such a definition, see Johnson, 16-17. For the broader subjects of this study, however, the distinction between “East” and (trans-Appalachian) “West” is a far more useful—though still problematic—dichotomy. Both of these distinctions are foremost cultural rather than geographical.

⁵ Pfeifer, 1, 1-5.

⁶ For a detailed case study of community definition through collective violence, see Rothman, 181-206. In an analysis of the Vicksburg mob similar to the one offered in this essay, Rothman argues that “the gambling riot became part of an ongoing process by which rioters and their supporters tried wrenching into being a sense of place where there was none and an economically virtuous community where individual self-interest was ascendant if not triumphant.” They seized the outbreak of violence as “an opportunity to imagine community, impose order, and affirm what they maintained were widely shared mores.” *Ibid.*, 188,

The citizens and militiamen of Vicksburg, like the Arkansas volunteers of a generation later, used violence to define and protect their community against a vague and nefarious *other*. Collective social violence consolidated the shared identity of its perpetrators' groups, whether those groups were pre-existing (like the government-sanctioned Arkansas Mounted Volunteers) or ad hoc (like Vicksburg's hastily founded anti-gambling society). This process left both groups' victims dehumanized, silenced, and subject to their assailants' actions and interpretations. Other clear similarities appear between the killings at Vicksburg and those at Agua Nueva. In both cases, the language and rhetoric that authors employed to justify and legitimize their communities' violence bore striking resemblance. Additionally, both acts of violence followed from earlier cultural antecedents, reaching as far back as the vigilante, militia, and riot cultures of the colonial Eastern Seaboard and Europe.⁷

Grimsted reminds us however, that social violence was not only a collective phenomenon. His study also examines a wide spectrum of individual forms of social violence, accompanied by a rich culture of rationalization and justification, especially in

183. Pfeifer also notes this function, but connects it more firmly with race, explaining that "white Americans seized upon lethal group violence unsanctioned by law—particularly hangings—to enforce mandates of racial and class hierarchy and to pull into definition tenuous and ill-defined understandings of social order and community." Pfeifer, 1. While racism indeed became an ever more prominent feature of mob violence during the antebellum era, there is much to suggest that concerns of class and community took precedence in many cases. For Pfeifer's goal of understanding the origins of late-nineteenth-century lynch law, race is a crucial variable, but it was not an automatic dimension in all incidents of antebellum collective social violence. As Grimsted's discussion of anti-criminal mob violence shows, victims included marginal persons of all races, although certain accusations and punishments often correlated to particular racial groups. Grimsted, 103-107;

⁷ A small, but growing historiography examines the deep roots of collective violence in the U.S., tracing them as far back as European riot culture. See Wayne E. Lee, *Crowds and Soldiers in Revolutionary North Carolina* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 13-45; Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch*, 13-47; McLure, "I Suppose You Think Strange the Murder of Women and Children," 4-7, 36-92; and Pfeifer, *The Roots of Rough Justice*, 7-32. McLure notably expands the bounds of this discussion, examining collective violence, broadly defined, over the *longue durée* (from 1652 to 1930) and showing the prominence of women as both victims and perpetrators.

the South. These acts ranged everywhere from boxing, whipping, and dueling, to assault and murder. Looking past the tropes of honor and masculinity that southerners employed to normalize such violence, Grimsted explains these acts primarily as tools of personal advancement.⁸ While, at Agua Nueva, strategies of action stemming from collective social violence predominated during and after the massacre itself, the cultural influence of individual social violence—especially visible in behavior towards regular army leadership—was an important aspect the U.S.-Mexican War’s non-sanctioned violence.

Indian Warfare and the Myth of the Frontier

Social violence was not the only culture of violence from which U.S.-Mexican War volunteers drew influence. Equally powerful was the cultural weight of what John Grenier has called the United States’ “first way of war.” Counter to historian Russell Weigley’s long-axiomatic focus on the development of a professional regular army, Grenier places at the center of early American military history the tactics of *petite guerre*, which dominated Anglo-American warfare against Native Americans. He argues that the first way of war “accepted, legitimized, and encouraged attacks upon and the destruction of noncombatants, villages, and agricultural resources.” This strategy comprised three main “pillars”: extirpative war, the use of irregular ranger troops, and scalp hunting.⁹ Although Grenier’s study ends in 1814, the practices he explores continued throughout the nineteenth century and had a profound—and for many older individuals, direct—

⁸ Grimsted, 86.

⁹ John Grenier, *The First Way of War: American War Making on the Frontier, 1607-1814* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 5-6,10, 19.

impact on American U.S.-Mexican War soldiers' conceptions of legitimate violence against their perceived racial inferiors.¹⁰ Indeed, the Arkansas Mounted Volunteers—and more clearly their comrades in the Texas Ranger volunteer regiments—directly inherited the long legacy of Anglo-American armies deploying irregular mounted ranger companies to carry out *petit guerre* tactics.¹¹

The first way of war and its representations formed just one piece of a larger schema through which American soldiers in northern Mexico understood U.S. westward expansion and the violence that accompanied it. Literary scholar Richard Slotkin has argued that the myth of the frontier is perhaps *the* dominant American mythology. That myth permeated both the first way of war and U.S.-Mexican War in complex and multiple ways. Throughout his formidable trilogy on frontier mythology in American literature, Slotkin identifies three ubiquitous tropes crucial to understanding non-sanctioned violence in the U.S.-Mexican War: "savage war," "the white Indian," and the heroic frontiersman.

¹⁰ See Amy Greenberg, *A Wicked War, Polk, Clay, Lincoln, and the 1846 U.S. Invasion of Mexico* (New York: Knopf, 2012), 48-49, 53. Greenberg uses the 1832 Black Hawk War to examine—through the experiences of Abraham Lincoln and John Hardin—the influence of Indian warfare upon the U.S.-Mexican War and its home-front politics and perceptions. In the scope of this study, at least three individuals appear who had participated in Indian wars: Archibald Yell, who fought in the Creek War, the War of 1812, and the Second Seminole War; John E. Wool, who fought in the War of 1812, played a significant role in the Cherokee removal, and accrued years of other experience on the frontier; and Harvey Neville and John Hardin, who both fought in the Black Hawk War.

¹¹ Grenier, 34-43. Grenier traces the development of a Southern tradition of horseback ranging beginning in Virginia and traveling westward with the expanding frontier into Kentucky, Tennessee, and the Old Southwest. He traces several cases in which these tactics were literally passed down from father to son so that "by the 1810's, the mounted rangers of Kentucky were the most sought-after troops for killing the Indians of the transappalachian West." On the use of ranger companies and "scorched earth" tactics by volunteer companies under Maj. Gen. Zachary Taylor in northern Mexico, see Paul Foos, *A Short, Offhand Killing Affair: Soldiers and Social Conflict during the Mexican-American War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 119-27.

“Savage war” was closely related to Grenier’s first way of war. It was a vision of frontier conflict that pushed the brutality and stakes of combat to their logical extremes. Slotkin explains that the concept was born in the earliest days of colonial settlement, when the extermination of white colonists by Indians seemed a plausible fear, but it persisted long after that threat ceased to be realistic. He argues that the same psychology was “culturally preserved” to justify the destruction and dispossession of Indians in the path of westward expansion.¹² Additionally, the trope served to enrich “the symbolic meaning of specific acts of war, transforming them into episodes of character building, moral vindication, and regeneration.” Slotkin extends this argument still further, asserting the visible influence of the savage war trope throughout American history. “American mythology of violence continually invokes the prospect of genocidal warfare and apocalyptic, world-destroying massacres.”¹³ This tendency of mythology to amplify the symbolic elements of frontier violence is clearly visible in accounts of the U.S. Mexican War’s non-sanctioned violence. The trope of savage war shaped accounts of

¹² Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment*, 60.

¹³ Ibid., 61. Slotkin applies a complex and nuanced theoretical understanding—far too extensive for use in this essay—of the impact of myth upon ideology, behavior, and world view, borrowing insights from anthropology, social history, and critical theory. For a full explanation of this model, see Ibid., 21-26. Most relevant for the purposes of this essay, Slotkin shows myth working in conjunction with ideology as a vehicle for culture’s influence on action and interpretation: “In the end, myths become part of the language, as a deeply encoded set of metaphors that may contain all of the ‘lessons’ we have learned from our history, and all of the essential elements of our world view. Myth exists for us as a set of keywords which refer us to our traditions, and (as Martin Green says) transmit ‘coded message[s] from the culture as a whole to its individual members.’” Ibid., 16. He cautions, however, “It is important that we keep in mind the distinctions between myth and real-world situations and practices to which it refers. Mythology reproduces the world with its significances heightened beyond normal measure, so that the smallest actions are heavy with cosmic significances and every conflict appears to press toward ultimate fatalities and final solutions.” Ibid., 61.

Agua Nueva just as it had shaped similar accounts of frontier massacres dating back to the earliest Indian wars of the Colonial period.¹⁴

The generalized trope of savage war often carried with it a matched pair of archetypal characters, those of the “white Indian” and the heroic frontiersman. The white Indian appeared in various forms dating back to Puritan New England. He was a personification of the wilderness’s corrupting potential for whites living on the frontier. As American colonists adopted aspects of Native American culture out of pragmatism—particularly Indian-style military tactics—writers commonly expressed fears of amalgamation with their racial antagonists. Slotkin shows that this trope appeared again in writings critical of Jacksonian democracy in the early and mid-nineteenth century.¹⁵ Opposite the white Indian stood the heroic frontiersman, epitomized by the figure of Daniel Boone. Slotkin explains that some segments of American society—particularly in the transappalachian West—developed an eventual admiration of the white Indian in certain forms, taking pride in the mastery of Indian characteristics. He argues that this vein of romanticism pervaded oral and written folk culture in the West. “Westerners admired men of action and prowess, men who knew how to live like Indians, fight like Indians, think like Indians, and take scalps like Indians. A real hero was one could beat the Indians at their own game.”¹⁶

Deeply ingrained in American culture, these racialized tropes were integral parts of the framework—cultural, psychological, and semiotic—through which American

¹⁴ For Slotkin’s treatment of early massacres of Indians by whites, see Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996), 55, 71, 73-4, 76, 85, 89-90, 143-3, 162, 166, 185, 188, 511, 516, 543.

¹⁵ Ibid., 42, 55, 395.

¹⁶ Ibid., 403.

soldiers and civilians understood the U.S.-Mexican War's non-sanctioned violence. However, frontier mythology was also strongly connected to popular conceptions of Mexico generally. Among the most immediate and familiar artifacts of the frontier myth for Americans in the 1840's was the Texas founding myth. Brian DeLay has identified this myth as a crucial element in shaping Americans' views of Mexico and the antebellum Southwest Borderlands. It stated that Anglo-American settlers in Texas had redeemed a "wasteland," dominated by savage raiding Indians, from Mexican mismanagement and racial ineptitude. White colonists quickly and easily conquered this wilderness by virtue of their inherent superiority—and through violence. DeLay explains that, through newspaper accounts, travel literature, and other sources, Americans came to "perceive the whole of the Mexican north in the same way that they saw the pre-American history of Texas, complete with savage Indians, suffering Mexicans, and desolate wastes."¹⁷ The tropes of the massacre and savage war again featured prominently in such mythologized events as Goliad, San Jacinto, and the Alamo, which planted themselves deeply into American popular culture. These entwined myths powerfully influenced the expectations of American soldiers traveling to Mexico in 1846.

Acting and Representing Collective Social Violence

The influence of cultural antecedents upon non-sanctioned violence in the U.S.-Mexican War is perhaps most visible in the accounts that soldiers wrote to explain,

¹⁷ Brian DeLay, "Independent Indians and the U.S.-Mexican War," *The American Historical Review* 112, no. 1 (2007): 48-52.

rationalize, and defend or condemn that violence. In doing so, they used patterns of representation well-practiced in pre-war society to document the similarly familiar strategies of action employed by their military communities. An in-depth analysis of one pre-war account reveals striking continuities in behavior, language, and meaning between pre-war and wartime collective social violence. On Saturday, July 4, 1835, the citizens of Vicksburg Mississippi gathered for an Independence Day barbecue led by the local militia, the Vicksburg Volunteers. There, a seemingly small disruption to these “usual festivities” provoked a swift and lethal backlash. The ensuing riot powerfully illustrated the social weight and centrality of both the militia itself and the ritual of nationalism and community it had assembled to lead. On July 9, local newspaper editor William Mills published in his *Vicksburg Register* a detailed narrative and justification of the mob’s actions. Because Mills wrote explicitly to buttress his community’s authority and assert its specific vision of reality, his story richly demonstrates the ways in which communities understood and represented acts of collective social violence, revealing much about the function and meaning of those acts in antebellum society.¹⁸

Throughout his narrative, Mills consistently worked to draw a firm division between those who were and those who were not legitimate members of the community. “After dinner, and during the delivery of the toasts, one of the officers attempted to enforce order, and silence at the table, when one of these gamblers, whose name is Calber who had impudently thrust himself into the company, insulted the officer and struck one

¹⁸ “From the Vicksburg Register,” *The (Tallahassee) Floridian*, July 25, 1835. This is one of many reprintings of Mills’s original July 9 article. For a detailed account of this story’s spread, see Waldrep, 29. Although various accounts of the Vicksburg incident contain a few minor discrepancies, none deviate drastically from Mills’s version of events. The most significant of these differences lay in the characterizations of perpetrators and victims. For a more extensive study of the Vicksburg mob and the national debate it triggered, see Rothman, 157-172.

of the citizens.” Right away, Mills established Calber and, by extension, the mob’s subsequent victims as hostile and troublemaking outsiders, while simultaneously affirming the militiamen, nameless and subsumed under group identity, in their unquestioned right to demand, and if necessary, *impose* order. He was careful here to show the militia as not only powerful, but also reasonable and just, explaining that “it was only by the interference of the commandant that [Cabler] was saved from instantaneous punishment.” According to Mills, this should have been the end of it. The crowd disbanded, the militia retired to the public square for drill, and Cabler left the initial confrontation unharmed.¹⁹

However, the gambler soon returned to cause further trouble. “The military corps...were there engaged in their exercises when information was received that Cabler was coming up, armed and resolved to kill one of the volunteers, who had been most active in expelling him from the table.” Mills blamed this seemingly ludicrous action on Cabler’s “desperate character,” explaining that the militia arrested him on sight and found on his person a pistol, knife, and dagger. This put them in somewhat of a predicament.

To liberate him, would have been to devote several of the most respectable members of the company to his vengeance, and to proceed against him at law, would have been mere mockery, inasmuch as not having had the opportunity of consummating his design, no adequate punishment could have been inflicted on him.²⁰

Here especially, Mills’s account must be read for what it is: a calculated attempt to assert the absolute rightness and morality of his community’s violence after the fact. In doing so, we must also recognize the peculiar modes of sanction and truth at work in incidents

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

and accounts of collective social violence. Rather than recounting the riot with any aim toward objectivity, Mills used his narrative as a tool to reinforce the unanimity of his community's actions and perceptions. He insisted that the crowd's violence enjoyed absolute sanction from that community, stating, "public opinion, both in town and country, is decidedly in favor of the course pursued. We have never known the public so unanimous on any subject." This sanction also worked to produce an exclusive and uncontested vision of the situation and its meanings—in this case, that Cabler presented a threat to the community that demanded immediate action. As a result, the legal impasse of his pre-emptive arrest could cleanly and conveniently justify punishment through extralegal means. "Consequently, it was determined to take him into the woods and *lynch* him—which is a mode of punishment provided for such as become obnoxious in a manner in which the law cannot reach." For Cabler, "lynching" entailed a nonlethal sentence, having not yet grown into its postbellum synonymy with the hanging of black men. He was "carried out under a guard, attended by a crowd of respectable citizens—tied to a tree, punished with stripes—tarred and feathered, and ordered to leave the city in 48 hours."²¹

Beating, humiliating, and banishing Cabler was only the beginning. Vicksburg's "respectable citizens" quickly seized the opportunity to extend their violence against a perceived criminal conspiracy at work in the town. Indeed, Mills began his account by establishing the long-standing existence of that conspiracy, claiming that

²¹ Ibid. Later accounts of the riot suggest that the town's opinion was far less unified than Mills claimed. See Rothman, 168-171. For a discussion of the evolution of lynching as a both a word and a cultural phenomenon, see Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch*.

For years past, professional gamblers, destitute of all sense of moral obligations—unconnected with society by any of its ordinary ties, and intent only on the gratification of their avarice—have made Vicksburg their place of rendezvous—and in the very bosom of our society, boldly plotted their vile and lawless machinations.

To Mills, this long-simmering threat seemed to erupt in response to Cabler's lynching.

Here again, he continued his task of clearly defining the community's social boundary.

"In the meantime one of his [Cabler's] comrades, the Lucifer of the gang, had been endeavoring to rally and arm his confederates for the purpose of rescuing him—which, however he failed to accomplish." Despite offering no evidence of collusion or a plot to rescue Cabler, Mills presented individual (or at most, loosely connected) criminality in collective terms. Throughout the rest of his account, he continued to reference this dimly defined "gang," a group he first introduced as not only criminal, but *evil*—the work of a devil.²²

This nebulous threat supplied all needed excuse for a complete purge of Vicksburg's criminal underworld. Mills explained, "To have suffered them any longer would not only have proved us to be destitute of every manly sentiment, but would also have implicated us in the guilt of accessories to their crimes." Most significantly however, he presented the gang as the town militia's moral and social antipode, suggesting that the masculine performance of militia duty was tightly bound to the community's collective identity. Mills constructed and presented that community, with the militia at its center, in direct opposition to the "gang." Weaving together the

²² "From the Vicksburg Register," *The (Tallahassee) Floridian*, July 25, 1835. Rothman shows that several of the mob's victims were not so simply marginal as Mills contended. All were permanent residents of Vicksburg—or no less permanent than anyone else in the young boom town—and several owned land, held slaves, or had families.

languages of kinship and patriarchy, he defined the former as “the most respectable citizens, heads of families, members of all classes, professions and pursuits,” while the latter was a “baleful class of society,” the faces of a “deep rooted vice” in need of “exterminating.” This distinction marked the gang—however the town chose to define its membership—as marginal men. With no other identity to overwrite and without the protection of social ties, they were subject to the labels and violence of Mills’s community.²³

To accomplish this new mission of expelling the gang, “the most respectable citizens” of Vicksburg formed another legitimizing organization: an anti-gambling society. Mills explained that this group “pledged their lives, fortunes and sacred honors, for the suppression of gambling, and the punishment & expulsion of gamblers,” appropriately alluding to the Declaration of Independence in hopes of convincing nearby towns to join in what he called, “The Revolution.” Again, he worked to assert sanction on multiple levels. “Having just aggravated the whole band of these desperadoes, and feeling no security against their vengeance,” the society met at the town courthouse—the traditional space of legitimacy for Colonial and Revolutionary era mob violence—to draft and post a set of written resolutions ordering all professional gamblers to leave the town within twenty-four hours.²⁴ Written warning—and Cabler’s punishment—proved sufficient to scare off most of the gang, and “it was sincerely hoped that the remainder

²³ “From the Vicksburg Register,” *The (Tallahassee) Floridian*, July 25, 1835.

²⁴ Ibid. For an in-depth study of collective violence in the eighteenth-century South, see Lee, *Crowds and Soldiers in Revolutionary North Carolina*, 1-5, 17-25. Lee explains that rioting, even against government authority, served a socially legitimate function in British Atlantic culture. When formal channels failed to address a significant grievance, communities employed targeted displays of collective violence, often harnessing the legitimizing power of authority symbols like local courthouses. Lee connects riot culture in North Carolina to its antecedents in British society.

would follow their example, and thus prevent a bloody termination of the strife which had commenced.” On Monday morning, “a file of several hundred citizens,” with the militia again at its center, made a sweep of suspected gambling houses to ensure their task was complete. They “marched to each suspected house, and sending an examining committee, dragged out every faro table and other gambling apparatus.”²⁵

This work was apparently nonviolent until the crowd came to the house of “one of the most profligate of the gang,” a man identified only as North. Although “it was understood that a garrison of armed men had been stationed [here,]…all hoped that these wretches would be intimidated by the superior numbers of their assailants and surrender themselves at discretion, rather than attempt a desperate defense,” Mills claimed, again juxtaposing a volatile, “desperate” threat with the reasonable and just intentions of his community. The crowd surrounded North’s house and broke in the back door. Upon breaching the darkened house, “four or five shots were fired from the interior, one of which instantly killed Dr. Hugh S. Bodley, a citizen universally beloved and respected.” Again, Mills gave sinister color to an unseen threat. “The interior was so dark that the villains could not be seen, but several of the citizens, guided by the flash of their guns returned their fire.” He then brought his narrative to a cathartic climax, framing the purge of North’s house as the penultimate step in purging the town itself. Outraged by Bodley’s death at the hands of these marginal men cowering in the dark, the crowd “burst open every other door of the building and dragged to the light, those who had not been wounded.” They brought five captured gamblers to the public square, where they were “immediately executed in the presence of the assembled multitude,” the community’s

²⁵ “From the Vicksburg Register,” *The (Tallahassee) Floridian*, July 25, 1835.

sanction offering as much legitimacy to as could any court. The crowd left the men hanging overnight, and buried their bodies “in a ditch,” denying them any mark of community membership even in death.²⁶

Through dozens of reprintings, Mills’s account of the Vicksburg mob traveled far that summer, showcasing the function and logic of mob violence in newspapers across the country and eliciting equally sensational statements of support and denunciation.²⁷ Mixing with reports of an apparent nationwide epidemic of rioting that year, his narrative and others became fodder for both sides of a contentious popular debate on collective social violence. A generation later, volunteer military communities in Mexico would employ similar chains of action to perpetrate the Agua Nueva Massacre and other incidents of non-sanctioned violence. Using the same logic, language, and narrative structure, they produced rich accounts, which circulated widely and fueled a growing anti-war movement, as politicians, veterans, and the American press fiercely debated the truth and significance of that violence and directly contested its popular memory. However, the connections between the U.S.-Mexican War’s non-sanctioned violence and its cultural antecedents were often far more tangible than similarities in behavior and representation.

²⁶ Ibid. In Mills’s narrative and in the public memory of the riot, Hugh Bodley—an unmarried non-landowning resident of only about two years—became constructed as “the perfect counterpoint to the men at whose hands he met demise.” This memory “served to make the riot and hangings seem virtuous, and Vicksburg a place where communal roots ran deep.” Rothman, 191-92.

²⁷ See Waldrep, 27-35; Rothman, 164-77.

Archibald Yell

All three main cultural antecedents of non-sanctioned violence in the U.S.-Mexican War—social violence, Indian warfare, and frontier mythology—are clearly visible in the life of one man intimately connected to the killings at Agua Nueva. Just weeks before the Vicksburg mob, an up-and-coming politician named Archibald Yell crossed the Mississippi river, traveling west to his adoptive home in the Arkansas territory and a cultural climate not unlike that on the river's eastern shore. The expanding slave society of the cotton frontier and its accompanying tensions of class and race combined with Indian removal and older frontier anxieties to make antebellum Arkansas rife with social conflict and violence. In the summer of 1835, newspapers reported 18 violent deaths in the territory, as the nation around it erupted in mob violence. Similar incidents continued to feature prominently throughout the era, feeding popular perceptions of Arkansas as a dangerous and unsettled frontier. The next year, a young northern lawyer wrote his cousin describing the mob killings of as many as thirty gamblers near Helena. Just days later, he resolved to leave, exclaiming, “I would have to sacrifice everything and endanger my life to live [in Arkansas].” In 1840, the small town of Cane Hill fell victim to a frantic and paranoid mob that hanged six people—three simply for criticizing its actions—in response to a pair of likely-unrelated murders. And in the capital of Little Rock—the exact cultural environment from which Solon Borland recruited one of the volunteer companies responsible for Agua Nueva—loosely organized

patrols and vigilante violence regulated the delicate racial order of an urban slave society.²⁸

Born in Tennessee in 1797, Yell found membership in the cult of Andrew Jackson early in life. Enlisting together with his brother at the age of seventeen, he fought as a militia volunteer during the Creek War and the War of 1812. Yell achieved moderate fame as the “boy captain of the Jackson Guards” (though the highest rank listed on his service records was Lieutenant). This reputation as an Indian fighter became a key part of his public identity, even earning him a Daniel Boone-esque ballad:

Jackson said to Archie, “I became your friend”
When I saw you fight the Indians down at horseshoe bend
I need a man like you who knows no fear
To bring law and order to the wild frontier

He would serve again during the second Seminole war in 1818. Although Yell may only have seen combat in the final phases of Jackson’s brutal scorched-earth campaign against the Creeks in Alabama, his time in Florida surely left him well-acquainted with the first way of war and the politics of partisan warfare.²⁹

As a frontier lawyer and politician in the style of Jackson, Yell’s military service provided the foundation for a successful career. However, violence proved an important

²⁸ Grimsted, 86; William Hauser to Julia Conrad, 1841, quoted in Ibid., 85; Ibid., 108; Paul D. Lack, “An Urban Slave Community: Little Rock, 1831-1862,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (1982): 263-65, 271-89 ; Fay Hempstead, *A Pictorial History of Arkansas from Earliest Times to the Year of 1890* (St. Louis and New York: N.D. Thompson Publishing Company, 1890), quoted in Desmond Walls Allen, *Arkansas’ Mexican War Soldiers* (Conway, Ark.: Arkansas Research, 1988), 6. Also see Donald P. McNeilly, *The Old South Frontier: Cotton Plantations and the Formation of Arkansas Society, 1819-1861* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2000).

²⁹ William W. Hughes, *Archibald Yell* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1988), 20-23, 24. Despite the ballad’s reference to the Battle of Horseshoe Bend—arguably a massacre of a fortified Creek village in which regular army soldiers drove fleeing Creeks across the Tallapoosa river and into a shooting gallery manned by mounted volunteers (see Grenier, 218-19)—Hughes argues convincingly that Yell did not see combat until the very end of the Creek War, missing the battles of Tallahatchie, Talladega, Emucfau, and Horseshoe Bend, and getting his first taste of combat in the Pensacola campaign.

dimension of Yell's public life well after his days as an Indian fighter. Biographer William Hughes has described him as a man of "bellicose tendencies" with a "highly combative nature...eager to engage in any kind of fight, whether it was fisticuffs, dueling, or military combat." One of Yell's experiences in particular illustrates Grimsted's argument about the self-advancing function of individual violence in southern society. Numerous accounts describe an incident in Tennessee in which Yell and three friends assaulted with clubs an elderly political rival unwise enough to publish criticism of Jackson. In the West, as elsewhere in the antebellum U.S., politics and violence were often intimately connected.³⁰

Yell was well suited to that system. Though his personal connection to Jackson seems to have been thin and one-sided, he found a lifelong mentor and political ally in James K. Polk. Long before "young hickory's" 1844 rise to the national spotlight, Yell had proved himself an invaluable local agent for the mid-level Democrat. The two corresponded frequently and candidly until Yell died in Mexico at the Battle of Buena Vista. Under Polk's tutelage, Yell's political career in Arkansas proved remarkably successful, earning him canonization as one of the state's founding fathers and a county bearing his name. He became the state's second governor in 1840, and served as a congressman twice, first in 1836 and again in 1844. However, the frontier and the grass-roots work of westward expansion held far greater appeal for Yell than Washington ever could. In 1846, with the outbreak of war against Mexico, Yell abandoned his congressional seat—without resigning—and returned to Arkansas to run for

³⁰ Hughes, 19, 33-35. Although Hughes suggests that Yell was merely a bystander in this attack, that frankly seems unlikely.

commandership of the state's first volunteer regiment. In addition to speaking volumes about Yell's disregard for the rules, this choice powerfully demonstrates the social weight of volunteer military service and its potential for individual advancement. Yell expressed his hope to use the war as a launch pad to a new political career in California, perhaps positioning himself to be its first governor after ushering the soon-to-be U.S. territory into statehood.³¹

Conclusion

Archibald Yell's life reminds us that cultural influence was not an abstract process, but a very tangible one, working through human experience. He and his subordinates not only read and heard stories of cultural forms like Indian warfare and collective social violence, but in many cases lived them personally; those forms were intrinsic to their milieu. Myth and culture are integral parts of the mechanisms through which individuals order, interpret, and respond to the world around them. When thrust into the unfamiliar environment of northern Mexico and the traumatic experience of war, American soldiers turned to the culturally-constructed strategies of action already familiar to them. As authors struggled to understand, rationalize, and explain to audiences in the United States the violence perpetrated by American volunteers in Mexico, they did so using familiar systems of meaning and pre-existing patterns of representation. While we must always be careful to understand acts of violence within their specific contexts, ignoring the deeper cultural strands into which they fit can support

³¹ Ibid., 9, 56, 72-73, 86, 152.

the false notion that such acts are anomalous. In the case of Agua Nueva, acknowledging and analyzing those strands reveals a great deal of continuity in action, understanding, and representation between non-sanctioned violence and its cultural antecedents.

CHAPTER III

VOLUNTEERS

“The men get into difficulties and broils with the inhabitants...No serious depredations have yet been committed, although...I find it difficult to restrain them.”¹

Illinois volunteer Harvey Neville was fascinated by the physical landscape of Texas. On his regiment’s march across the prairie toward northern Mexico in the summer of 1846, he described in his diary a country marked by “the ravages of time and war.”² Crumbling buildings and fallow fields told for Neville a tragic story of decades of violence and decay deeply colored by the myth of the frontier. He described the mission of Concepción as a derelict that had “reached the ultimatum of its glory whilst yet in its youth, and instead of being the seat of science, literature and religion, has now, under the baneful influence of war of fifty years, become the resort of wild beasts.” Its “ancient and terror-struck appearance,” was only deepened by the ghastly knowledge that “after a battle fought by the Mexicans and Texans near this place, the former took four hundred

¹ Brig. Gen. John E. Wool to Maj. William Bliss, November 19, 1846, quoted in Francis Baylies, “The March of the United States Troops, under the Command of General John E. Wool, from San Antonio, Texas to Saltillo, Mexico in the Year 1846,” *Stryker’s American Register and Magazine* 4 (July, 1850): 305-306.

² Harvey Neville, *The Mexican War Diary of 1st Lieutenant Harvey Neville, Company H, 22nd [i.e. 2nd] Regiment, Illinois Volunteers* (N.p.:N.p., 1957), 7-8.

of its slain into this sanctified edifice whose bones were afterwards hauled out and broken.” Upon reaching the “immense ruin” of the Alamo, he found it difficult to trace the fort’s corners “after a score of wars and diverse cannonades and entrenchings.” San Antonio itself received a description similarly heavy with frontier romanticism: “A lonely wolf approaches the end of the street and sends his shrill howl to his mate on the other side.” Like its legendary fort, Neville depicted the town as a ruined space marred by violence, a “once peaceful and flourishing residence of many thousands...dwindled down to the miserable habitation of 1200 or 1500 inhabitants of mixed descent, Spanish, Indian, and Negro” with its stone houses “scarred by bullets, arrows, and cannon balls.”³

Neville’s narrative of decay and decline foreshadowed the conflict, violence, trauma, and ruined expectations that he and his comrades would experience over the following year. Confronted by physical hardship and illness, stagnation, and constant uncertainty, as well as increasing violence from an unseen and inscrutable enemy, volunteers responded using patterns of action and representation developed in the United States. These patterns often entailed both mundane and spectacular acts of violence, creating fragmentation and animosity within the army and feeding a steadily worsening pattern of reciprocal violence between American soldiers and Mexican civilians and guerrillas. Through their accounts of these conflicts, volunteers defined, defended, and sanctified their military communities in the same manner as their civilian predecessors.

³ Ibid., 8-9.

Campaign Conditions

At San Antonio, Neville's Second Illinois Foot Volunteers and another regiment of Illinois infantry joined with the Arkansas Mounted Volunteers; independent companies from Kentucky and Texas; and several units of regular U.S. Army infantry, cavalry, and artillery to form the Central Division under command of Gen. John E. Wool.⁴ Even before this rendezvous, physical hardship in various forms marked the first experiences of American soldiers bound for Mexico. Long marches, scarce water, and epidemic disease followed the division throughout its time in Texas and the Mexican state of Coahuila. These experiences compounded the growing frustrations of an Army eager for battle, yet constantly disappointed. In his published history of the Central Division, Arkansas volunteer Jonathan Buhoup lamented that he and his comrades, “underwent twice the hardships and suffering that Gen. Taylor’s Division did, and traveled about four times as far; all, all to take one town.”⁵ Such physical hardships and dashed expectations combined with false alarm, rumor, and uncertainty to create the conditions under which both internal conflict in the U.S. Army and external conflict against Mexican guerillas and civilians would develop. Exploring those conditions and their impact on U.S. soldiers is a crucial first step in attempting to reconstruct and understand both the Agua Nueva Massacre and the larger phenomenon of non-sanctioned violence in the U.S.-Mexican War.

⁴ Jonathan W. Buhoup, *Narrative of the Central Division* (Pittsburgh: M.P. Morse, 1847), 14.

⁵ Buhoup, 82.

Illness was a constant trauma underlying the Central Division's entire campaign, and it held powerful significance for the volunteers under Wool's command, featuring prominently in their writings. The volunteers not only associated disease with other forms of physical hardship, but also used illness and its resulting deaths as fodder for their conflicts both within and outside of the army. Indeed, descriptions of death by illness often appeared adjacent to accounts of conflict and violence.⁶ More generally, however, in recording the deaths of ill comrades, volunteers focused and amplified their disappointed expectations of adventure and glory in battle. For John Palmer, a Kentuckian serving in the Arkansas Mounted Volunteers, the death of a soldier in his company "perfectly delirious" though "apparently in great pain" with the measles cast doubt on the army's whole cause: "What are we fighting for? 'Tis true the spoliations upon American Commerce require redress; but the disputed territory is not worth one tenth the part of the sum expended upon it by the United States already."⁷ Harvey Neville reacted still more dramatically to such deaths, lamenting, "O, War! Thou dreadful monster! Not content with plunging sword and bayonet to the heart of man, thou dragest him to foreign lands, where his unacclimated constitution sinks, and he falls an easy prey to death."⁸

Dashed expectations of battle in the face of physical hardship became further compounded by the ubiquity of fear, uncertainty, rumor, and false alarm. Although the

⁶ See especially John C. Palmer, *Diary of John C. Palmer 1846-1847*, The Huntington Library, November 11, 1846, in which Palmer recorded the death of a comrade and blamed General Wool for refusing to procure quarters in town for sick soldiers; and ibid., December 27, 1846, in which Palmer described his comrades' refusal to burry a dead soldier's body because of a rumor that Mexicans had been disinterring bodies in the area. After this, he immediately went on to speculate about the killing of civilians by men of his regiment.

⁷ Palmer, November 25, 1847.

⁸ Neville, 28.

Central Division fought only one pitched battle against a Mexican Army, its soldiers almost daily noted fearful or excited rumors of looming combat. Early in the campaign, soldiers accepted such information as fact. In October, 1846 for instance, Palmer expressed his certainty that the next morning would see a battle against the large Mexican force rumored to be nearby, insisting that “only those who wish there may be no fighting, doubt the probability of our having to fight tomorrow.”⁹ These expectations were almost always unfounded, but false alarms and “stampedes” were frequent.¹⁰ Such episodes strongly affected soldiers. After a false alarm on Christmas day threw his regiment into an uproar, Palmer lamented, “Oh! If the long faces of our men could have been seen, they would have formed a subject for the pencil of Hogarth. For myself, I almost hesitate to say it, ‘twas like throwing a blight upon my whole system.”¹¹

Indeed, fearful rumor was among the most common threads visible in accounts by the Central Division’s soldiers, receiving constant comment even when it did not disrupt the routine. On the one hand, these reported threats were often quite real, such as the blocking of a stream by Mexican guerillas in late November near the town of Monclova. On the other, they could also be downright absurd, such as a rumor circulating around the same time that Mexican General Santa Anna had been personally spying on U.S. troops disguised as a peasant selling oranges and sugar.¹² This climate of rumor and uncertainty soon left troops deeply frustrated, hurting morale and incurring disdain toward

⁹ Palmer, October 26, 1846.

¹⁰ See Buhoup, 23, 32, 96-99, 100; Augustus Ehinger diary transcript, 1846-1847, MS 282, Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library, Rice University, 19-20, 47; Otto B. Engelmann, "The Second Illinois in the Mexican War: Mexican War Letters of Adolph Engelmann, 1846-1847." *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 26, no. 4 (January 1934): 396; Palmer, December 25 1846, January 15,16, and 31, 1847.

¹¹ Palmer, December 25, 1846

¹² Buhoup, 76, 86; Ehinger, 35. Ehinger insisted that General Wool “told and believed” this rumor.

commanders. In December of 1846, Illinois volunteer Augustus Ehinger explained, “The most contradictory rumors about the enemy, about Santa Anna’s army, about marching on, about peace, etc., are circulating in camp.” Indeed, he believed the information at hand to be so unreliable as to conclude that “In general we know less about the progress of the war than our friends in the United States do.”¹³ By January of 1847, a jaded John Palmer wrote, “Still we have no authentic accounts of the enemy, and are almost forced to doubt the proximity of any number of them.”¹⁴ In some cases, such disillusion may even have led to recklessness. In late December of 1846, Illinois Volunteer Adolph Englemann wrote, “the numerous false reports as to the nearness of the enemy have gotten the men to the place they don’t believe anything with the result that the men slip out of camp in utter disregard of safety regulations.”¹⁵

Together, these interconnected factors of physical hardship, disappointed expectations, and fearful uncertainty helped to create the social environment in which events like the Agua Nueva massacre played out. However, they also set the stage for often bitter conflicts within the U.S. army, interactions equally crucial to understanding non-sanctioned violence.

¹³ Ehinger, 49.

¹⁴ Palmer, January 18, 1847.

¹⁵ Engelmann, 419.

Masculinity, Conflict, and Social Violence in the Ranks

As historian Paul Foos has shown, internal conflict plagued the U.S. military throughout the U.S.-Mexican War.¹⁶ The army was divided along ethnic, religious, and class lines, as well as by rank, place of origin, and between regulars and volunteers. These conflicts played an important role in shaping non-sanctioned violence against Mexican civilians and guerillas. In addition to feeding a social climate conducive to such violence and shaping the responses of both volunteers and their superior officers, internal conflict solidified group identity within volunteer factions and served as a site in which to rehearse the patterns of collective social violence at work in non-sanctioned violence against Mexicans. The Arkansas Mounted Volunteers and other volunteer groups employed collective social violence first to define their communities in opposition to Army leadership, and then to defend those communities against a poorly-understood external Mexican threat in spite of their superiors' attempts at control and punishment.

The most prominent internal conflict visible in the campaign of the Central Division was the constant struggle over command and discipline between the volunteer corps and Brig. Gen. John E. Wool. Although most officers incurred the disdain of some of their subordinates during the war, Wool's troops seem to have singled out their division commander as the ultimate cause of their miseries. While the relationship began relatively amicably, it quickly deteriorated. Augustus Ehinger wrote that "General Wool is liked less every day by the volunteers because of his aristocratic manner and his harsh

¹⁶ Paul Foos, *A Short, Offhand Killing Affair: Soldiers and Social Conflict during the Mexican-American War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 83-112.

treatment to them.”¹⁷ John Palmer similarly believed that “He does not like us, and there is no love lost. Indeed, I do not think anyone is pleased with the operations of the General; ‘tis said that his own staff does not like him.”¹⁸

Circumstances compounded the volunteers’ disdain for Wool. They often blamed the General for false alarms and canceled orders. Palmer complained that “the General is very easily imposed upon by false reports.” The common problem of confusing orders within the Central Division invited similar consternation against the commander. After a string of conflicting orders prevented Palmer’s company from visiting a nearby town, he blamed Wool, fuming, “Volunteers do not like to be treated thus.”¹⁹ Death from disease elicited still harsher indictments of Wool. Both Palmer and Ehinger explicitly blamed the deaths of their sick comrades on Wool’s refusal to quarter soldiers in towns. In their view, he had abandoned his troops to the unhealthy and exposed conditions of camp life in order to appease Mexican civilians.²⁰

Among the several volunteer units under his command, Wool found his strongest opposition in the Arkansas Mounted Volunteers, and especially their regimental officers, Col. Archibald Yell, Lt. Col. John Selden Roane, and Major Solon Borland. An examination of the interactions between Wool and the Arkansans suggests that, at its deepest level, this conflict represented the collision of two opposing conceptions of masculinity. Their clashes foreshadowed the emergence of the two opposing archetypal masculinities—restrained manhood and martial manhood—that Amy Greenberg has

¹⁷ Ehinger, 43.

¹⁸ Palmer, October 14, 1846.

¹⁹ Ibid., October 19, 1846.

²⁰ See Ibid., November 10-11, 1846; Ehinger, 43.

explored in the period immediately following the U.S.-Mexican War. Despite his martial career, Wool was a man deeply invested in personal restraint, discipline, and responsibility. Conversely, Yell and his subordinates were hot-blooded and at times violently ambitious men, embracing rather than trying to subdue their aggressive tendencies.²¹

Augustus Ehinger clearly saw that competing masculinities were at the core of the friction between the gentle Wool, a career officer raised in New York state, and his unrefined, fiercely independent, almost exclusively western volunteer corps. Like numerous other volunteers, Ehinger criticized Wool's focus on appearance and etiquette, comparing "Old Fussy" (as the volunteers called him) to the revered and romanticized figure of Maj. Gen. Zachary Taylor. "General Wool, as old as he is, is the exact counterpart of General Taylor, very much of a dandy."²² John Palmer felt similarly. As Wool and his regulars entered the captured city of Monclova, Palmer ridiculed what he saw as the General's unmanly vanity:

This was a gala-day with the "cock-feathered gentry", as Major Beall calls Gen. Wool and his staff. The General and his staff, accompanied with the 1st & 2nd Dragoons, as a guard, went in and performed he ceremony of Military occupation...dressed in their "best bibs and tuckers."²³

Palmer described the men of the Arkansas Mounted Volunteers as a far more pragmatic lot. Indeed, for them, the goals and purpose of military service were fundamentally different. While Wool was a gentleman officer, a life-long professional

²¹ Amy Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 11-13. For more on Wool's life and personality, see Harwood Perry Hinton "The Military Career of John Ellis Wool, 1812-1863," (PhD. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1960).

²² Ehinger, 32.

²³ Palmer, October 31, 1846. "'Bibs and tuckers'" refers to upper-class women's garments.

soldier rooted in ideals of military duty and tradition, the leaders of Palmer's regiment were politicians. Although many volunteers, like Yell, had prior military or militia experience, few had any formal training. Indeed, organizing and leading volunteer units was first and foremost an exercise in political patronage.²⁴ The captains and regimental officers of the Arkansas Mounted Volunteers were nearly all upwardly mobile aristocratic lawyers and politicians. Like company-level officers below them, they were elected by popular vote. After being passed over for promotion, Palmer realized with frustration that his unit was "a great political machine, which Col. Yell and Lieutenant Colonel Roane act upon merely to serve electioneering purposes." He complained, "There is no office...within the gift of Col. Yell, that is not the subject of caucusing between Yell and Roane. Their object is to make political capital out of every appointment."²⁵ For Palmer too, however, volunteer military service was a gendered political act of personal advancement. Writing in eager anticipation of a battle the following morning, he felt sure that "every man will have an opportunity to distinguish himself. Then too, I shall be able to write in legible characters my claims to the office of First Lieutenant." Palmer's eagerness to prove himself was tied not only to his ambitions for promotion within the regiment, but to his postwar plans as well. He concluded, "I shall indeed be sorry to be forced to return to Kentucky without having been able to do as much for myself as many of those who were at the battle of Monterey."²⁶

Goals were not the only difference between the competing masculinities of Wool and the Arkansans. Arkansas volunteer Jonathan Buhoup's campaign history shows that

²⁴ See Foos, 45-59.

²⁵ Palmer, November 15, 1846.

²⁶ Ibid., October 26, 1846.

his regiment's conceptions both of itself and of the war were heavily tied to frontier mythology, specifically Richard Slotkin's archetypes of the white Indian and the heroic frontiersman.²⁷ These archetypes, like the frontier myth itself, were deeply gendered, and they strongly influenced western volunteers' conceptions of masculinity. Buhoup's first descriptions of the Arkansas volunteers were awash in folksy frontier romanticism. "It was an amusing sight to see the tall athletic Arkansawian, who had been born on a bear skin, rocked in a hollow log, and had never attempted to march before, except marching through the cane-brake after game." Indeed, the influence of frontier mythology is visible throughout Buhoup's narrative. Most significantly, he continually recounted the exploits of a mysterious character named simply, "the Indian." Paul Foos has insightfully analyzed the connection between the Indian and non-sanctioned violence, arguing that he was likely a composite figure which allowed Buhoup to "distance the 'white' or noble aspects of his peers from the ignoble behavior that accompanied the regiment from San Antonio to Saltillo."²⁸ However, Buhoup employed the Indian far more broadly. The character was a symbolic antagonist not just to the Mexicans, but also to the imposed authority of regular army leadership. Nor was the Indian simply a villain; at times, Buhoup explicitly called him "our hero," using the semi-fictional character to personify the Arkansans' resistance towards and mastery of any outside threat to the ideals of heroic frontier masculinity.²⁹

²⁷ Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996), 42, 55, 395, 403.

²⁸ Foos, 144-45.

²⁹ Buhoup, 16, 22.

The Indian defied authority from the very outset of Buhoup's narrative. On the march from San Antonio, despite explicit orders against hunting, he broke rank several times, bringing back fresh game for his comrades. Buhoup claimed that the Indian's return from the second of these hunting expeditions caused the army to "stampede," the first of several points suggesting the author's ambivalence toward the type of masculinity the character represented. However, the Indian was first and foremost a symbol of resistance and nonconformity. Buhoup mentioned him again when discussing attempts to punish disobedient soldiers by sentencing offenders to hard labor in camp. He explained, "Our Indian became an almost constant victim—not for plundering the Mexicans, but for being absent at roll call." However, the Indian was immune to the army's punishments; "He was sentenced to labor, but no labor would he perform. He said they might stop his pay, but he would make it up off the Mexicans."³⁰ True to Slotkin's archetype of the white Indian, Buhoup's character adapted to outwit, outfight, and finally master his frontier antagonists on multiple levels, defying the odds and escaping unscathed from numerous violent confrontations. Most strikingly, by the end of Buhoup's narrative, the Indian had mastered use of the lariat—the infamous weapon of Mexican rancheros—to turn the spoils of conquest into a lucrative business, stealing Mexican horses and mules and selling them to soldiers returning home on foot.³¹

The opposing masculinities of Wool and the Arkansans first came into open conflict at the end of a fifteen-mile march on December 1, 1846. Buhoup explained that, upon finding his regiment's assigned campsite to be down-stream from the rest of the

³⁰ Ibid., 59.

³¹ Ibid., 134.

army—an unhealthy position which, according to Buhoup, the Arkansans had regularly been forced to occupy—Colonel Yell ordered his men to a more favorable spot. Wool was incensed and ordered the Colonel to return to his designated site. Yell stood firmly disobedient. Palmer described how one by one, all three regimental officers—Colonel Yell, Lieutenant Colonel Roane, and Major Borland—defied their commander and were each in turn placed under arrest. The senior captain at last “intimated his willingness to obey orders,” and Wool “suffered” the regiment to stay put.³²

Similar disputes continued throughout the campaign. In late January, 1847, Wool ordered Yell to send several company-strength patrols to guard the mountain passes along the southern front to prevent Santa Anna’s northbound army from surprising the American forces spread between various sites in the vicinity of Saltillo. Yell again openly defied Wool, sending the commander a written protest. While Yell’s original letter does not survive, Wool’s response spoke powerfully to the balance of power within the Central Division, as well as to Yell’s mindset—anti-authority and community-centric. Wool bitterly rescinded the order. “The order agreeably to your request is revoked and you will send out such patrols as you deem proper or necessary to prevent a surprise of your camp.” He closed the letter with a sharp rebuke. “I will only add in conclusion that it is better, generally, to obey orders than to disregard them.” Wool here explicitly blamed Yell’s insubordination for the recent capture of a large group of Arkansas volunteers by a Mexican cavalry patrol. “Major Borland and his party were captured in

³² Ibid., 88-89, Palmer, December 1, 1846.

consequence of disobeying my orders, and you came very near doing the same thing, and had you done so, you from your own statement would have been captured.”³³

Augustus Ehinger discussed the animosity between Wool and the Arkansans at length, recalling an anecdote in which, upon being told by the General’s orderly to quiet down, “the Arkansans replied, ‘Tell Johnny Wool to kiss our ____.’”³⁴ The feud, however, would go far beyond harsh words and protests. Ehinger supposed that “the Arkansas volunteer cavalry which General Wool calls Colonel Yell’s Mounted Devils, if provoked by him, would at the first opportunity blow out his life.” He recounted a recent confrontation that had nearly proved him right. “An Arkansas Volunteer passing the General’s tent stopped and out of curiosity looked in. It displeased the general and he told him to leave. As he did not leave immediately, he told his orderly to point his gun at him.” The Arkansan, however, was defiant. He “pointed his gun at General Wool and said, ‘Old horse, damn your soul, if you give such orders I will shoot you for certain.’ General Wool withdrew quickly.”³⁵ Ehinger was not alone in claiming that the feud between Wool and the Arkansans had nearly turned lethal. Arkansan Thomas Jefferson Kelly recorded a similar confrontation later in the campaign. Two days before the Battle of Buena Vista, in the contentious aftermath of the Agua Nueva massacre, Kelly claimed to have entered Wool’s tent at night to find Yell winding up to swing a camp stool at the

³³ Gen. John E. Wool to Col. Archibald Yell, January 29, 1847; Col. Archibald Yell Letter Book; Letters Sent and Received at Headquarters of the Central Division, 06/1846 - 02/1847, Box 1, PI-17, Entry 132A; Records of the Adjutant General’s Office, 1780’s-1917, Record Group 94; National Archives Building, Washington, DC. (Hereafter, “Archibald Yell Letter Book”). Emphasis in original. The weight of Wool’s accusation warrants comment here. The capture of Borland’s party represented a significant blow to the morale of the unit (see Palmer, January 25-27, 1847). Wool personally blaming Yell for this attack would surely have angered the Colonel deeply.

³⁴ Ehinger, 44. Censored in original.

³⁵ Ibid., 43-44.

General. He arrived just in time to catch the stool and restrain Yell. The two men walked back to the Arkansan camp, the Colonel “white and trembling with rage, the maddest man I ever saw,” and Kelly firmly believing that the Yell would have killed their commanding officer had he not intervened. Kelly’s account in particular adds powerful weight to the harsh letters exchanged between Wool, Yell, Roane, and General Taylor in the days after Agua Nueva. Whether or not the events described by Ehinger and Kelly actually occurred, the fact that their authors considered them true is telling.³⁶

Social violence within the Central Division was not limited to the feud between Wool and the Arkansans. Like their predecessors in the pre-war United States, volunteers also used collective violence to solidify group identity, suppress dissent, and punish those who acted against group interests. Illinois volunteer Adolph Engelmann described one such incident, in which the men of Capt. Peter Lott’s Second Illinois, Company E—one of the units whose men who would later intervene to stop the Agua Nueva massacre—meted out a lynch-law punishment upon one of their own. The victim supposedly reported to the regiment’s major a Mexican merchant who had been illegally selling liquor to the soldiers. As a result, the merchant had been arrested and lashed. In response to the loss of their alcohol supply, the men of Lott’s company “held court,” complete with all the legitimizing features of extralegal punishment in the peacetime United States:

A jury was selected, speeches heard for and against, the jury retired into a tent and soon returned a verdict of guilty and sentenced the informer to be ridden on a rail.

³⁶ Thomas Jefferson Kelly, narrative in possession of Kelly’s great-grand-daughter, Mrs. Mary Jane Moore, Bentonville, Arkansas, quoted in William W. Hughes, *Archibald Yell* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1988), 106-7. Unfortunately, this source apparently remains privately held, so I could not consult it directly. Hughes, however, describes this incident in great detail, using extensive quotations.

No sooner said than done, and among much shouting he was ridden around camp on a pine pole.³⁷

At times, authors recounted collective social violence within the ranks in far more explicit detail, turning to patterns of representation developed in pre-war society and proudly recounting their volunteer communities' actions against perceived threats.

Jonathan Buhoup's book included a particularly rich example. In early November, supposedly in response to complaints about the quality of the Mexican flour they had been issuing, the army decided instead to provide soldiers with a daily ration of nine ears of corn to be ground into flour by each company. The volunteers were outraged.

Believing this new fare to be fit only as animal feed, they refused to touch the large pile of corn set out in camp, braying and snorting at passing regular officers. While several volunteers note this incident, Buhoup's chapter-long account stands out. His telling of the corn dispute bears striking resemblance to William Mills's account of the 1835 Vicksburg riot, further illustrating the strong cultural influence of antebellum collective social violence upon patterns of action and representation in U.S.-Mexican War non-sanctioned violence. Again, as with Mills's account, we must remain conscious of the peculiar modes of truth and sanction at work in accounts written to justify collective social violence. Whether or not Buhoup's narrative matched the events themselves, its cultural content remains equally valuable.³⁸

Buhoup began, as Mills had, by establishing a threat to his community that demanded immediate action. "The effect was horrible on the volunteers. They needed a Robert Peel to advocate their cause, but so distinguished a peer they had not,

³⁷ Engelmann, 433.

³⁸ Ehinger, 28-29; Engelmann, 407-8.

consequently, they had to substitute some other great man in his place.” Next—again matching the actions and language of Mills’s community—Buhoup described a nighttime meeting in which the volunteers “framed a series of resolutions for the immediate repeal of the prevailing and obnoxious corn laws, that threatened a mutiny in the camp.” The mob formed a legitimizing ad hoc organization, complete with “a President, Vice President and Secretary, and other necessary officers” and then “proceeded with the business of the meeting, by appointing a committee to draft resolutions.”³⁹

Buhoup next proceeded to give a quasi-verbatim transcript of the meeting itself. The President opened with a dramatic and hyperbolic speech, welcoming the “delegates” of the various volunteer units. “Fellow citizens; or excuse me, if you please, fellow soldiers,” he said, “You have met here in order to adopt measures to veto one of the greatest outrages ever attempted to be imposed upon civilized people.” Railing against the “all-fired, infernal, flambusted, penitentiary instruments called a steel mill,” he connected the community’s plight to biblical precedents, suggesting “perhaps it was on one of them that Sampson ground, after the Philistines had put his eyes out.” Framing the army as a tyrannical threat to liberty, he went on to proclaim, “I tell you that we are a free and independent people, and have a right to express our opinions as we please, when we are opposed upon.” With this cue, a passing regular army soldier spoke out to underscore the threat, exclaiming, ““You are not free.””⁴⁰

The meeting concluded with the committee reading its resolutions to the crowd. Each in turn was interrupted by the Indian, illustrating the fact that, despite decorum, the

³⁹ Buhoup, 67-68. Emphasis added to highlight diction common to both Mills’s and Buhoup’s accounts.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 68-69. Italics in original.

community was ultimately protected by frontier masculinity and violence. These resolutions first asserted the justice and legitimacy of the mob's actions, and went on to demand the repeal of the "obnoxious law." Among these resolutions was also an explicit threat of physical violence against those who would neglect the community's interests:

Resolved, That when any one Captain refuses to use his influence with either General Wool or Shields, his name will be taken down and kept as a living witness against him, until we are discharged, and that we then and there select a man to give him the all-firedest whipping he ever got in his life.

The Indian enthusiastically volunteered for this duty. Tipped off by the same soldier who interrupted the President's speech, a regular army officer arrived to break up the meeting. The President told him "It is nothing but a prayer meeting." Unconvinced, the officer replied that he had heard the word "corn" as he approached. The President replied sardonically, "Oh, that was Mr. Secre—a-hem...He was saying that he hoped the Lord would let us have plenty of corn for our horses, and that our nine ears might be of a large size and good quality."⁴¹

Although the meeting dispersed, Buhoup's community would not let the officer go long unpunished. Several pages after describing the meeting, Buhoup wrote of a "trick played off last night...by a Sergeant of the Arkansas Cavalry." While leading a picket guard of several men to sweep a Mexican town for stragglers, the Sergeant came upon an initially unidentified regular army officer, whom he approached and accosted. As the two men argued, "one of the guard was getting a *lariat*, which he had to tie his horse with, into a position that it might drop very handsomely over a man's head, and catch him in a noose." Meanwhile, "Another was very calmly engaged in taking a large

⁴¹ Buhoup, 70-71. Italics in original.

Mexican spur from his heel, which looked as though it was to be introduced into a gentleman's mouth, to effect the purpose of keeping him quiet." The Sergeant told the officer, "So you won't go along peaceably, won't you? Bill, have you that rope ready?" ... 'Drop it over, and Tom, you have the big spur ready to keep him from hallooing?" With this the officer ran, but the Arkansans again caught him. After he promised no further challenge, they marched him to the edge of camp and warned, "after this, never endeavor to disturb prayer meetings again, in camp, or you might be trapped in a worse snap than this." A satisfied Buhoup closed his chapter on the corn dispute by explaining, "Our readers will recognize the officer as the one who broke up the corn law meeting."⁴²

Such community-administered punishments—and internal conflicts more generally—were important precursors to non-sanctioned violence against Mexican civilians. These episodes helped to solidify group identity within volunteer factions, honed the patterns of collective social violence that those groups would use to suppress dissent and protect themselves from perceived threats, and conditioned patterns of action and representation employed during and after incidents of non-sanctioned violence.

Racism, Fear, Violence, and the Construction of "The Mexicans"

Parallel to their deteriorating relationship with the regular army's command, the volunteer corps experienced a declining view of and relations with the Mexican civilians they encountered during the occupation of Coahuila. While these interactions were

⁴² Ibid., 74-75. Italics in original.

initially positive and even productive, they quickly sank into a pattern of worsening reciprocal violence. Through the course of this decline, volunteers blended the diverse population of northern Mexico into an inscrutable and nefarious other, “the Mexicans.” As a result, it becomes nearly impossible at times to distinguish violent actions by and against Mexican soldiers, guerrillas, and civilians. In the face of the perceived threat from “the Mexicans,” Volunteers often responded through non-selective reprisals, likely worsening the situation by pulling in previously neutral parties. By February of 1847, this pattern of reciprocal violence combined with rumors of a massive northbound Mexican army to create a climate of fear that pushed the volunteer corps very near its breaking point.

While it is tempting to frame violence against “the Mexicans” as a simple extension of racial violence elsewhere in antebellum U.S. society, the connection between racism and non-sanctioned violence was more complex.⁴³ Although Central Division volunteers used racialized language somewhat regularly in their writings, it is conspicuously absent from their accounts of guerrilla attacks and non-sanctioned

⁴³ A limited body of scholarship analyzes American racism toward Mexicans in the period surrounding the U.S.-Mexican War. Through the lens of intellectual history, these works examine American authors’ published and unpublished expressions of their racial views both in the peace-time antebellum era and in accounts by U.S.-Mexican War soldiers. See David J. Weber, “‘Scare More than Apes.’ Historical Roots of Anglo American Stereotypes of Mexicans in the Border Region,” in *New Spain’s Far Northern Frontier: Essays on Spain in the American West, 1540-1821*, ed. David J. Weber, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979), 293-308; Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 166-67; Arnoldo De León, *They Called Them Greasers: Anglo Attitudes Toward Mexicans in Texas, 1821-1900* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983); James M. McCaffrey, *The Army of Manifest Destiny: The American Soldier in the Mexican War, 1846-1848* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 66-79. Although, one of these historians has gone so far as to suggest that the “debasement of the Mexicans served a military purpose in that the troops had less difficulty in taking the lives of enemy soldiers they considered to be subhuman,” the connections shown between racism and violence are tenuous at best, and these studies prove to be of limited use in understanding the role of racism in non-sanctioned violence. Ibid., 79.

violence.⁴⁴ Soldiers in Mexico did not discuss such violence in overtly racialized terms. Instead, they constructed their Mexican enemy as a non-descript other. Racism informed this discourse, but it did not drive it, nor did racism directly cause non-sanctioned violence. In recounting peaceful interactions, soldiers of the Central Division often wrote in significant depth to describe the diversity of the Mexican population as they understood it. For instance, while recalling the people he met in Monclova, Augustus Ehinger “observed that the inhabitants are of two classes.” He explained a basic distinction between “the aristocratic and mostly of Spanish descent, who are the landowners,” and “the other class...a great mixture of all colors of skin. They are the mechanics and laborers.” This conception, shared by many volunteers, blurred the complex hierarchies of class and race maintained by Mexican society into two discrete categories of people.⁴⁵ Though the results were simplistic, volunteers did attempt to understand Mexican social realities in non-violent exchanges. However, when recording acts of violence, authors (with few exceptions) collapsed such distinctions into a singular epithet, “the Mexicans.” Racialized language did not appear vis-à-vis non-sanctioned violence until later secondhand accounts, in which authors began to amalgamate such acts with other, more overtly racialized, forms of violence.

The Army’s first contact with Mexican civilians elicited almost unanimously positive remarks by the Central Division’s writers. At the town of Presidio del Rio Grande, Adolph Engelmann wrote his parents in Illinois to tell them that he expected this relationship to continue and benefit both sides. “It’s a great war,” he gushed. “Instead of

⁴⁴ For racialized language in accounts by Central Division soldiers, see Ehinger, 25; Engelmann, 373, 383-86, 397-9; Neville, 9, 14, 25-26.

⁴⁵ Ehinger, 30. For similar conceptions of Mexican social hierarchies, see Buhoup 64; Engelmann, 420.

the coming of the Americans being a detriment hurting the Mexicans it is a blessing, for they can sell things that otherwise would have no value.”⁴⁶ Indeed, the only widespread source of friction was the price of goods sold by Mexican merchants.⁴⁷ Others described the surrender of this town by its Alcalde in similarly positive terms. Only Agustus Ehinger added a note of suspicion, saying, “This fellow is not to be trusted” and blaming the Alcalde for an attack on a party of U.S. Army dragoons and Texas rangers four weeks earlier.⁴⁸ Despite Ehinger’s suspicion, such cooperation continued. Further south, at the town of Santa Rosa, John Palmer noted “we found the people very friendly. All wearing smiling faces, and treating us with the utmost kindness; nothing they had was too good for us.”⁴⁹ Ehinger explained that the townspeople seemed to greet the army as liberators. “The Mexicans instead of opposing us are quite friendly being afraid of the Indians and the Mexican tax collector or soldiers, having suffered greatly during the last 10 years at their hands.”⁵⁰ However, as winter set in and the army moved deeper into Coahuila, occupying areas for longer periods of time, these relations gradually soured.

By November, the army had arrived at the city of Monclova. Palmer here noted the absence of the smiling faces he had met in Santa Rosa, wondering, “Perhaps as we approach the Mexican Capital, the citizens become more loyal.” Ehinger expressed a similar uneasiness in the city. “It must be a queer feeling for the inhabitants to know that we are in possession of their town. It seems impossible that they should be friendly to us.” Engelmann started to become fearful of the civilian population around this time.

⁴⁶ Engelmann, 392.

⁴⁷ See Ehinger, 16, 17, 19; and Engelmann, 394.

⁴⁸ Ehinger, 16.

⁴⁹ Palmer, October 20, 1846.

⁵⁰ Engelmann, 403.

Foreshadowing the frequent and feared attacks upon lone soldiers that winter he wrote, “In and around Parras are to be found a lot of rascals who will rob anyone they find alone and drunk.”⁵¹

Acts of violence between American volunteers and Mexican civilians started small. Plundering and petty theft—both sanctioned and non-sanctioned—were the first visible episodes in the deteriorating pattern of reciprocal violence. Early on, authors noted numerous instances of individuals and groups helping themselves to the fruits of Mexican agriculture.⁵² In some cases, the army attempted to punish such acts, but in others, it seems to have encouraged or even ordered them. In early November, after ranch hands from a nearby hacienda had been stealing Arkansan horses, Palmer wrote that Wool threatened the owner, “if he did not send them in to-day, he would turn the men loose upon him.” Palmer seemed to look forward to this possibility, saying, “If he does, I shall try for a pony.” A month later, when a group of “the Mexicans” blocked off a stream supplying water to part of the army, a regular army major dispatched a party of Dragoons to warn them, “if it was not immediately let on he would hold the whole valley responsible for it.” With this, Palmer had grown tired of Wool’s attempts to appease. “The time has arrived when it is necessary that we should [make] the Mexicans understand that it is the two nations, and not the soldiers of each that are at war... We should quarter with them,” he suggested, “making the Alcalde of the district provide for our subsistence. This would soon bring the enemy to terms.” Palmer’s reasoning here, however, was disjointed, reflecting a cloudy understanding of the relationships and

⁵¹ Palmer, November 8, 1846; Ehinger, 27; Engelmann, 416.

⁵² See Buhoup, 43, 49-50, 52; Engelmann, 421; Palmer, October 28 and November 4, 1846.

distinctions between different levels of the Mexican government, the Mexican military, and variously hostile and neutral segments of the civilian population.⁵³

The transition from theft and plundering (without personal violence), to acts of non-lethal personal violence, and finally to lethal acts of violence is a difficult pattern to trace. Volunteers often referred to violence indirectly or in a non-specific past tense. Buhoup noted that at Monclova in November, guerrilla bands were not yet a major threat, but a few months later, “we were in for it.”⁵⁴ It is unclear whether the move towards lethal violence occurred because of the army’s more permanent occupations in central Coahuila, because volunteers themselves had grown more violent by that point, because population of that area was actually more hostile to the invaders, or because of an increase in government-sanctioned guerrilla activity. The number of factors at play combined with the poor understandings of the American writers recording that violence makes a definite answer nearly impossible. Buhoup noted a non-lethal attack by U.S. Soldiers on Mexican civilians as early as October 21, writing that a group—“we are pretty confident that it was none of the volunteers...nor do we think that our Indian...would so far forget his duty as to be guilty of such a cowardly and dastardly act”—beat and robbed a camp of Mexican merchants selling sugar blocks, throwing the men into a river in an act he considered “half murder.”⁵⁵ Other volunteers noted a wide range of similar violent encounters between U.S. soldiers and Mexican civilians in the fall and winter of 1846. In November, Engelmann wrote that “one Sunday,” a volunteer

⁵³ Palmer, November 1, 28, 1846.

⁵⁴ Buhoup, 60.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 40-41.

named Corder “stole my pistol, got drunk and pulled a Mexican off his horse who just started to beat him up when an American patrol came along and rescued him.”⁵⁶

Buhoup traced the gradually developing pattern of reciprocal violence between the volunteers and “the Mexicans” through the exploits of the Indian. The character caused trouble from the moment the army crossed the Rio Grande. At Presidio del Rio Grande, upon first seeing the Alcalde—and particularly his fine blanket—“our son of the forest[’s]...eyes sparkled.” He resolved to steal the blanket, explaining to Buhoup and his fellows a plan to ““skeer [the mayor] out of it...without knocking the old chap over...for you see that would be wasting ammunition.”” Despite their discouragement, he “said he did not think there was any harm in it...anything was fair in war.” Several days later, the Indian reappeared, having stolen the blanket by conning his way into the Alcalde’s home and escaping only to find himself trapped outside of camp and forced to spend a sleepless night fighting off a pack of wolves.⁵⁷ Later on, in the city of Monclova, Buhoup explained that the Indian refused to pay the “exorbitant prices” charged by Mexican merchants, and instead took to robbing them at gunpoint. “I wait until dark, when the Mexicans start for home. I then lie in the bushes until a man comes along. Then I run out with my gun and *skeer* him so bad that he leaves his basket, and then I have nothing to do but help myself.” Later on, Buhoup wrote that the Indian soon received a taste of his own medicine at the hands of a group of Mexican men. He told the other volunteers that, upon being out one night unable to find a fandango to attend, he met four Mexican men who offered to show him to one. ““Just as we entered into an exceedingly

⁵⁶ Engelmann, 406-07.

⁵⁷ Buhoup, 26-27, 37-39.

dark street, they all laid hold of me.”” Throwing away the Indian’s knife, the four men brutally beat him, and took his ““last chew of tobacco,”” leaving him ““a used up Ingin.””⁵⁸

Such non-lethal attacks were only the beginning for the Indian. By late December, he had graduated to life and death struggles with “the Mexicans.” On the regiment’s march to Patos, he lagged behind and “some Mexicans fired on him and shot his horse from under him.” He took cover, exchanging fire with his attackers for some time. “After dark, the Mexicans ceased firing and he...crept forth...and came through gullies and ditches until he found the camp.” Telling Buhoup and his comrades of this encounter the following morning, the Indian “looked uncommonly dejected, and said he must have killed one of them Mexicans, for he heard him holler.” Buhoup explained that a group of soldiers later returned with the Indian to the scene of his shoot-out, confirming that “from all appearances...he had either killed or wounded one of them, for the ground was very bloody.”⁵⁹

Earlier in his narrative, Buhoup made reference to similar attacks upon volunteers who found themselves alone in enemy territory. “The exhausted pedestrian was compelled to fall behind, and perhaps not reach the camp till after night-fall, besides running a great risk of falling a victim to the *lariette* or *lasso* of some murderous

⁵⁸ Ibid., 78-9.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 101-102. On January 2, 1847, Engelmann wrote to his parents describing several recent incidents of violence between volunteers and Mexicans. Here, he described an encounter strikingly similar to that in Buhoup’s narrative: “One of the Arkansas men, located at Patos rode out by himself and was attacked by Mexicans who shot his horse from under him, he got into a thicket and shot three of the Mexicans in a heap, whereupon the rest got a move on them to get out of the dust.” These two accounts likely document the same event, suggesting that the Indian was indeed a composite character rather than an epithet for a particular volunteer as Buhoup presented him. Engelmann, 424.

ranchero.”⁶⁰ The volunteers soon became all too familiar with this practice they came to call, “lariation.” From their earliest experiences in Mexico, many authors expressed fascination with the skills displayed by Mexican horsemen with the lariat. Harvey Neville explained this tool as “nothing more than a long rope with a noose at one end, which is used for throwing over the heads of wild horses and mules, or anything else that may chance to come in their way...Every Mexican that rides has a lasso, if for nothing else than to tie his horse to graze.” Buhoup, however, explained that “the Mexican” turned the lariat into “a deadly weapon against the invaders of their country.”⁶¹

December of 1846 was a key turning point in the violent exchange between Central Division volunteers and “the Mexicans.” On December 27, while his Arkansas regiment marched toward the hacienda of Patos, John Palmer described a disturbing shift in his comrades’ behavior. “A portion of our regiment are assuming to act as Guerrillas, and have been killing, I fear innocent, Mexicans as they meet them and then come into camp and report that the Mexicans tried to lariate them.” Giving no details, he added, “This has led to reprisal and recrimination until it is dangerous to be out alone.” The same day, Agustus Ehinger described the narrow escape of an Illinoisan traveling with Palmer’s regiment—the earliest contemporary reference to a specific lariation attack visible within the scope of this study. Three days later, “the Mexicans” severely wounded an Arkansan serving guard duty at Patos. Palmer speculated, “this may lead to severe retaliation on our part.” And retaliate the unit apparently did. On January 4, 1847,

⁶⁰ Buhoup, 48. Italics in original. Were we to overlay Buhoup’s narrative on a timeline of the campaign, this passage would be chronologically the earliest reference to lethal violence against the volunteers by Mexican civilians or irregulars visible within the scope of this study. However, because Buhoup’s book is not a diary, but a post-hoc narrative, using it to determine chronology is problematic and probably counterproductive.

⁶¹ Neville, 30; Buhoup, 43-44.

Wool's aide de camp, Irvin McDowell, relayed to Yell the General's disapproval of "the conduct of the troops at Patos." He warned, "Gen Wool directs me to say if you cannot control them from committing depredations upon the inhabitants you are desired forthwith to notify him and he will...send a regular force to that place." Buhoup's story of the Indian's shootout fits roughly around this time as well—December 27 or 28. Apparently, Buhoup either adapted an actual incident or condensed several separate acts of violence between the Arkansans and "the Mexicans" into a single semi-fictional episode, using his character as a proxy through which to claim his community's narrow victory in the exchange. On January 2, Engelmann wrote to his parents describing the recent spate of violence. In addition to recounting an incident nearly identical to the Indian's shootout, he noted at least five other violent clashes between volunteers and "the Mexicans." Despite a slight lull around mid-January, similar attacks and reprisals continued well into the early months of 1847.⁶²

Fear and uncertainty played a crucial role in the volunteers' perceptions of and responses to lariaton attacks. By fall of 1846, the Central Division's authors began to note with increasing frequency and unease rumors (both founded and not) of attacks upon individual and small groups of U.S. soldiers.⁶³ In doing so, they also blended together the perceived threats from Mexican civilians, guerrillas, and soldiers. These rumors combined with a steadily increasing number of actual attacks and reprisals to create a constant climate of fear within the volunteer corps. The inscrutability of such attacks was a large part of what made them so traumatic and threatening in the minds of the volunteers.

⁶² Palmer, December 27, 30, 1846 (emphasis in original); Irvin McDowell to Archibald Yell, January 4, 1847, Archibald Yell Letter Book; Buhoup, 101-102; Engelmann, 423-24

⁶³ See, Buhoup, 72, 79; Palmer, November, 13, 24, 1846.

Unable to predict them or clearly understand the forces responsible, Volunteers characterized lariation and other small-scale attacks as savage, faceless violence.⁶⁴

Unable to determine responsibility for particular attacks, they often retaliated non-selectively, likely expanding the scope of the conflict by involving previously neutral Mexican parties.

While only fragmentary evidence of this cycle of attack and reprisal remains, a few accounts offer insight into how it functioned. On January 19, a pair of Mexican men attacked a group of Arkansas volunteers returning from a drill. They stole two horses, wrote Palmer, “and attempted to lariate one of the men. Immediately several of the men started in pursuit, and in a couple of hours two of them returned, bringing with them one of the Mexicans.” The Arkansans determined that this prisoner, “belongs to the Ranche at which we are now quartered,” though whether he had actually taken part in the attack or was merely in the wrong place at the wrong time is certainly open to doubt. The slapdash man hunt continued for several more hours as Palmer’s comrades sought out the second attacker. Recording his diary entry as the incident was still unfolding, Palmer noted grimly, “Those who were in pursuit of the other have been returning for some hours, in scattered parties; none of whom can give any consistent account of him. I have no doubt but they killed him.” Palmer predicted similarly that “the fellow who is now in

⁶⁴ Brian DeLay’s discussion of the role of inscrutability in shaping Mexican conceptions of Indian raiding during the 1830’s and ‘40’s has heavily influenced my thinking here. See Brian DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the U.S.-Mexican War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 213. These dim understandings have caused similar problems for historians attempting to study guerilla activity in northern Mexico during the war. While a few have attempted to penetrate the confusion of American understandings, most have chosen to focus on an American perspective; without significant access to Mexican sources, this essay will unfortunately offer a similar treatment. See Eric W. Knapp, “‘War Without Pity’: Guerrilla Conflict in the Mexican War” (M.A. Thesis, The University of Nebraska, 1995), 18-22. Primary and secondary sources on the Guerrilla war in the north remain fragmentary.

custody, I suppose will be shot.” Ten days later he was proven right. As the unit marched to a new camp, the prisoner “was started off in advance of the squadron, in charge of three men. They report that he attempted escape and they shot him.” Engelmann described a similar incident not long after in which three men of the First Illinois regiment (not his unit) “were murdered at the ranch (San Juan de Bandista) one half mile from camp.” He described the quick and careless reaction of Col. John Hardin, who “at once sent Crow with his Company to the ranch and they arrested the first 16 men they got hold of in an endeavor to find the real culprits.”⁶⁵ While the impact of such reprisals is near impossible to gauge, the responses visible in these two accounts highlight both the outrage that lariation attacks incurred as well as the dim understandings that volunteer units had of their violent exchange with “the Mexicans.”

Conclusion

In the weeks before the Agua Nueva massacre, the parallel conflicts between the volunteer corps and the regular army leadership, and between the volunteers and Mexican civilians, soldiers, and guerrillas steadily worsened. In addition to an increasing number of lariations and reprisal killings, rumors of Santa Anna’s approaching Mexican army also became more frequent and more substantiated. Numerous reports circulated among the various U.S. camps telling of scattered attacks by advance parties of Mexican soldiers. A climate of fear overtook the U.S. army as the anticipated battle drew closer.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Palmer, January 19, 29, 1847; Engelmann, 435-36.

⁶⁶ See Ehinger, 56-7; Neville, 30.

The civilian population showed similar apprehension. Volunteers noted a mass exodus of upper class Mexicans from Saltillo and its surrounding countryside.⁶⁷ Significantly, on January 25, two weeks before the Agua Nueva massacre, a group of Arkansan volunteers under the command of Major Solon Borland—the man who originally recruited one of the volunteer companies responsible for the massacre—came under attack by a large patrol of Mexican cavalry while guarding the U.S. Army’s southernmost outpost at Encarnación. Borland and his entire command were captured. Yell hastily scrambled together a party of several hundred men to give chase, but they returned unsuccessful. Palmer noted the powerful impact of this attack on his unit, lamenting, “it appears that we are to be cut off in detached parties until none are left...Sleep is now out of the question.”⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Engelmann, 436-7; Palmer, February 1, 1847.

⁶⁸ Palmer, January 25, 1847.

CHAPTER IV

MASSACRE

“Certain newspaper correspondents have commented on it rather freely...So much has already been said about it that is not true, that we feel ourselves bound to refute some of the base slanders and lies in relation to it. The circumstances are these...”¹

On February 13, 1847, the U.S. Army’s camp at Agua Nueva was cold but beautiful. “This place is truly romantic,” wrote Indiana volunteer Benjamin Scribner with quickly numbing fingers. “There is an extended plain, dotted with white tents, and the huge mountain piles around excite the loftiest sentiments. If the gorgeousness of the sunsets could be transferred to canvas, the painter might be called a wild enthusiast.” The rugged countryside around the city of Saltillo had been particularly cold the preceding few days, and a snowstorm—the first Scribner had seen in Mexico—left a dusting of white that clung to the crests of the surrounding mountains. Despite that view, however, he could not help but echo the apprehension of his comrades. “We now occupy the post of danger, and know not what is in store for us,” he wrote. Those snow-covered

¹ Jonathan W. Buhoup, *Narrative of the Central Division* (Pittsburgh: M.P. Morse, 1847), 106.

hills seemed equally capable of concealing a 15,000-man army, bands of murderous guerrillas, or a grisly massacre.²

It was likely not without hesitation that days earlier, on February 8, a twenty-four-year-old private in the Arkansas Mounted Volunteers named Samuel H. Colquitt ventured out alone into that same broken landscape. In the last month, two other men of his regiment had gone missing under similar circumstances, their fates unknown but the worst presumed, and two weeks prior, at least thirty-five others—including the Captain and seven other men from Colquitt's own company—had been taken prisoner by an advance patrol of the approaching Mexican Army. Most likely going out to train the new horse he had just acquired, February 8 was the last time any of Colquitt's comrades saw him alive. Sometime that evening, Mexican guerrillas or civilians from a nearby settlement seized the opportunity to kill an invading soldier and ambushed Colquitt. They threw a lasso around his neck and dragged him behind a horse for several hundred yards, leaving him dead or dying against a bush a few miles from the American camp.³

The next morning, a group of Indiana volunteers found Colquitt's battered corpse, and men from his company brought him back to camp to be buried. Later that day, the Arkansans made another discovery in the mountains. Camped with their loaded wagons

² B. F. Scribner, *Camp Life of a Volunteer: A Campaign in Mexico, or A Glimpse at Life in Camp* (Austin, TX: Jenkins Pub., 1975), 57-58.

³ Compiled Service Records of Volunteer Soldiers who Served during the Mexican War in Organizations from the State of Arkansas (National Archives Microfilm Publication M1970, Roll 7); Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1762-1984; Record Group 94; National Archives Building, Washington D.C. See carded service records for Colquitt, Samuel H. ("Murdered by Mexicans, near Camp Taylor, Agua Nueva, Feby, 8"); Arbaugh, William ("Left Camp at Patos, Mexico Jany 12, Supposed to be killed"); and Brown, Simion ("left Camp at La Vacquerien Jan 21, Not heard of since Supposed to have been killed by Mexicans."). Although several narrative accounts of Colquitt's death claim that other Arkansans had died previously in lariation attacks, Colquitt's appears to have been the first such confirmed case. Given the war's high desertion rates and the freedom of movement visible within the Central Division's volunteer corps, disappearance did not necessarily mean death.

were several Mexican families, probably poor laborers from Agua Nueva or other nearby settlements fleeing the expected battle, as Saltillo's elites had done weeks before. The camp was alive with rumor that night as word of Colquitt's death circulated and groups of volunteers with diverse and unclear intentions drew plans. Early the following morning, a party of Arkansans rode out and took revenge for Colquitt's death.⁴ Their violence would inspire comment from dozens of authors. Volunteers, regulars, camp followers, newspaper correspondents, and the army's leadership would all produce accounts of the events that day, struggling to piece together coherent narratives from fragmented experience and wild rumors. In attempting to rationalize and explain the killings to audiences in the United States, they used well-practiced patterns of representation, incorporating the massacre into broader cultural conceptions of violence in the antebellum era.

The Sources

The Agua Nueva massacre's rich documentation makes it a uniquely valuable case study for beginning to understand the larger trend of non-sanctioned violence in wartime Mexico. At first glance, these sources present a frustrating cacophony of conflicting stories. However, when carefully scrutinized, they each yield clues to reconstructing a coherent chain of events and to understanding how American soldiers

⁴ Zachary Taylor to The Adjutant General, June 4, 1847; Letters Received by the Office of the Adjutant General (Main Series), 1822-1860 (National Archives Microfilm Publication M567, Roll 0362); Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1762 – 1984; Record Group 94; National Archives Building, Washington D.C.

and civilians understood, remembered, represented, and politicized the killings. The source base can be broken down into three distinct groups: firsthand eyewitness accounts, early secondhand accounts written within a few days, and late secondhand accounts written well after the fact. While all of these have informed past scholarship, social and cultural historians have greatly favored the latter two groups.

Only two sources contain accounts by actual witnesses to the killings. The first is an official report compiled by Maj. Gen. Zachary Taylor in June of 1847 and sent to Adjutant General Roger Jones in Washington D.C. This fifty-five page document contains copies of correspondence between Taylor, his lieutenants, and various commanders of the involved volunteer units as well as a transcript of the army's official inquiry into the killings. Over the course of three days, a commission of high-ranking officers interviewed fourteen eyewitnesses, piecing together a relatively coherent narrative of the incident. The transcript is unfortunately vague as to the conduct of the commission—whether it convened behind closed doors, whether the investigators asked direct or leading questions, whether witnesses heard each other's testimony—but there is much to suggest that each witness testified separately, and with little prompting. The transcript apparently recorded witnesses' statements near-verbatim, but offers no dialogue from the commissioners whatsoever. Each witness seems to have responded to an initial question, but their statements appear as fluid monologues with no breaks or pauses, suggesting that any interjections the commissioners made were minimal. Additionally, each witness's testimony is followed by the sentence, "The Witness was here permitted to withdraw." Lastly—and most importantly—each witness presented

distinct, yet compatible stories. They freely and explicitly indicated gaps in their knowledge and recollection, and did not reference each other's testimony.⁵

The only other eyewitness account of the killings themselves, an entry in Illinois volunteer Harvey Neville's diary, further validates the commission report. Neville corroborated the commission's findings in all but the final death toll—a matter we shall revisit later.⁶ While no source is free of complications, the commission transcript and Neville's diary provide the earliest and most detailed accounts of the killings available. Whether accurate or not, the story as told by these eyewitnesses presents a baseline narrative structure from which most later accounts only gradually deviated. The only other known sources that directly relate the events at Agua Nueva are all secondhand accounts.⁷ These include several private letters and diaries written by volunteers and

⁵ The exact nature of this “military commission” remains somewhat unclear. It listed no charges or defendants, and made no recommendations regarding prosecution or punishment. It was neither a court martial, nor a military commission as defined under the provisions of Gen. Winfield Scott’s General Order No. 20, issued about a week after the Agua Nueva investigation upon Scott’s arrival in Tampico, Mexico on Feb. 19, 1847. Largely in response to the conduct of U.S. soldiers at Matamoros and Monterrey, Scott designed a tribunal system specifically to prosecute crimes within U.S.-occupied Mexican territories. These commissions operated throughout the rest of the war with the authority to sentence and carry out capital punishment. The commission at Agua Nueva, however, seems to have functioned more similarly to a court of inquiry, a body not unlike a civilian grand jury, which investigated the facts of a particular incident and recommended whether or not to proceed with a court martial. According Gen. Wool’s orders, the commission was assembled “for the purpose of enquiring into the facts connected with” the killings at Agua Nueva. It would “assemble examine the witnesses under oath & use every exertion to detect the criminals,” suggesting that, had the commission managed to learn more details, courts martial may have followed. In its official report, however, the commission merely gave a “statement of the facts connected with the murder of some Mexicans near this camp on the 10th inst, so far as they have been developed by the recorded evidence.” Taylor to AG, June 4, 1847; Alexander Macomb, *The Practice of Courts Martial* (New York: S. Colman, 1840), 91-94; Justin H. Smith, *The War with Mexico* (New York: Macmillian 1919), 2:220-21, 455-60; James M. McCaffrey, *The Army of Manifest Destiny* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 107-10, 170; Louis Fisher, “Military Commissions: Problems of Authority and Practice,” *Boston University International Law Journal* 24, no. 15 (2006), 23-25.

⁶ Taylor to AG, June 4, 1847; Harvey Neville, *Mexican War Diary of 1st Lieutenant Harvey Neville, Company H, 22nd [i.e. 2nd] Regiment, Illinois Volunteers*, (N.p.: n.p., 1957), 31-33; Neville did not testify before the commission.

⁷ All of these sources clearly recount the massacre using received secondhand information, usually making their absence at the event itself clear. None of their authors claimed to have personally witnessed the

camp followers, two anonymous letters published as newspaper articles and prolifically reprinted, two books written by veterans seeking to defend the record of American volunteers, and a memoir that remained unpublished and largely unknown until the 1950's. The changes in these later sources powerfully demonstrate the extent to which rumor, culture, and politics shaped the development of the massacre's collective, popular, and historical memories. A chronological reconstruction of the killings and their immediate aftermath helps to make sense of this complex and apparently contradictory source base. The two firsthand primary sources present a dispassionate and richly detailed account. However, reconstructing this century-and-a-half-old crime exactly as it happened would be neither possible nor especially productive. Some discrepancies cannot be resolved; some gaps cannot be filled; some questions cannot be answered. But the massacre as it was perceived, contested, and remembered, remains well preserved.

The Massacre

On the evening of February 9, as word of Colquitt's death spread throughout the American camp, Capt. Elsey Coffey of the 2nd Illinois Foot Volunteers visited the tent of his regiment's commander, Col. William Bissell. Coffey obtained the Colonel's permission to take out a group of men the next morning to "examine into the affair." He was particularly curious about the Mexican camp discovered earlier that day. The Arkansans were planning an outing of their own, and he "wished to accompany them to

killings, except for Samuel Chamberlain, *My Confession: The Recollections of a Rogue* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987).

assist in attacking any hostile armed Mexicans or in capturing any concealed arms.”

With Santa Anna’s army so close, Coffey would seem to have had ample reason to suspect the presence of soldiers or spies hiding in the surrounding mountains.⁸

The following morning, February 10, there was a hushed race to leave camp. The commander of the Arkansas Regiment, Col. Archibald Yell, and his lieutenants later claimed to have given an order restricting the entire regiment from leaving camp. However, if Yell in fact gave this order, his men took no notice; volunteers were well practiced at breaking such restrictions on their movement, and those offenses were usually shrugged at. Testifying before the military commission two days later, Lt. Nathaniel Niles (2nd Illinois) recounted his visit to the Arkansas camp that morning. He described a scene of tense excitement as men from his own unit as well as several from Arkansas Companies B and G prepared to leave Agua Nueva. Anxious to go along, Niles asked one of the Arkansans to wait until he could get a horse. “He replied to me in a low tone of voice, as if in confidence, that they must hurry to get ahead of the Illinois men & arrive there before any one else so that they should not be interrupted.” As a group of several Arkansans rode past Niles and out of camp, “one of Colquitt’s company told me that one of the men who passed out was named Osborn & that after the discovery of Colquitt’s death on the preceding day, he Osborn had killed one or two Mexicans.” Niles made clear to the commission that “The avowed intention of the party starting out was to kill the Mexicans.”⁹ In addition to establishing the Arkansans’ plan to retaliate against their perceived enemy, Niles’s testimony provides another important piece of

⁸ Taylor to AG June 4, 1847.

⁹ Ibid.

information. His mention of Osborne's bragged-of murders—a subject on which Pvt. John Osborne's single line of commission testimony was predictably silent—offers hints of the powerful rumor mill functioning within the volunteer corps, even before the massacre. This was the first of several statements to note Arkansas volunteers boasting of killing Mexicans in steadily increasing numbers. As with the mysterious reports of their conduct at Patos that December, some members of the regiment seem to have openly embraced their reputation as frontier killers.¹⁰

Coffey and Capt. Peter Lott started out on foot with a party of fifty men. Shortly after, a group of about twenty Arkansans on horseback easily overtook them, riding at high speed into the rugged countryside. The Illinoisans continued in pursuit, as gunshots rang out ahead of them. Lott's 2nd Lt., Ashton Madeira, rode out ahead of the other Illinoisans, but could only barely keep pace with the Arkansans. He "heard the report of a gun & saw a Mexican fall," stating that, although he could not identify him, "One of the Arkansas men fired the shot." The Illinoisan footmen continued behind Madeira, finding this first victim and a trail of three more dead or dying Mexican men spread out across a mile of rough terrain. The chase ended several miles from the American camp, where a few commission witnesses found the Arkansan party, along with several individuals from Illinois and Kentucky, gathered around the rim of a ravine or arroyo (a dry desert creek bed), at a site some authors called variously "Catana," "Cerro de Catana," and "Ojo de

¹⁰ Ibid.

Agua de Catana.” They had gathered together a large group of Mexican men and were apparently planning to kill them.¹¹

Capt. Madison Miller (2nd Illinois) testified that he was among the party that first reached the main body of Mexicans. Aware of the Arkansans’ intentions, he attempted to stall for time until Coffey and Lott’s party could catch up. He told the commission, “From the conversation of those there I learned that several had been killed & that they intended to kill more.” Placing his own actions at the center of his narrative—possibly to distance himself from the Arkansans and deflect any suspicion of his early arrival at the scene—Miller explained, “I indeavored to collect the Mexicans together for the purpose of saving as many lives as possible.” Lieutenant Madeira watched from the periphery as the Arkansans “went round among the Mexican carts & drove the Mexicans up in a body.” Miller recalled, “There was some talk of making an indiscriminate slaughter of the Mexicans.” When he suggested an attempt to determine which of the men were guilty, the Arkansans objected, saying that “they were all guilty alike.” A bitter debate ensued, “in the course of which it was said that those who did not wish to take part in what they were going to do had no business being there.” Failing to convince the Arkansans, Miller made one final attempt to delay them. “The excitement continued to grow very high & I then stated that some of the Illinois boys were coming & it was but

¹¹ Ibid; Isaac Smith, *Reminiscences of a Campaign in Mexico: An Account of [sic] the operations of the Indiana Brigade on the line of the Rio Grande and Sierra Madre, and a vindication of the volunteers against the aspersions of officials and unofficials* (Indianapolis: Chapmans & Spann, 1848) 43. “Ojo De Agua de Catana is a Spanish name meaning literally, “Eye of Water of Catana.” “Cerro de Catana,” or “Hill of Catana,” is the name of the massacre site given in Eduardo Gonzales’s Feb 13, 1847 letter to Zachary Taylor. This site was possibly at the foot of a hill south of Saltillo now called Sierra de Catana. The distances and numbers noted throughout most of the source base on Agua Nueva are often meaningless. For instance, commission witnesses claimed the distance between the American camp and the arroyo was as far as ten miles, while the number of Mexicans camped there was between 200 and 400. These figures seem impossibly high.

fair to wait for them. This was agreed to...[and] in a short time, Cptns Coffee & Lot with their command arrived.”¹²

Captain Miller’s testimony sheds some light on the racial dynamics driving violence at Agua Nueva, marking the killings as an act of non-selective reprisal.¹³ As in previous encounters with “the Mexicans,” American volunteers collapsed the social complexity of northern Mexico into a vague and nefarious other, attributing an individual crime to Mexicans collectively. Miller’s claim that the Arkansans considered their victims, “all guilty alike” powerfully demonstrates this. It is indeed possible that some of the men in this group may have been responsible for Colquitt’s death. The nature of guerrilla warfare in Coahuila remains largely unclear, especially before the summer of 1847. Although there were state-sanctioned guerrilla units engaging American forces around Saltillo at the time, little is known about how they operated. Colquitt’s killers may well have disappeared into the civilian population. We cannot know whether these particular men had participated in the attack or supported those who did. However, for the Arkansans, their guilt or innocence was immaterial.¹⁴

Miller’s description also reflects a cloudier set of intentions on the part of the Arkansans than a simple unanimous plan to kill the entire group. Certainly some of them had a mass killing in mind, but their collective inaction, delay, and debate suggest that many were not quite ready to have so much blood on their hands. The wild excitement of

¹² Taylor to AG, June 4, 1847.

¹³ John David Unruh, *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 187. Unruh observes a similar phenomenon in the violent interactions between overland emigrants and Indians in the American West.

¹⁴ On Guerrilla operations in northern Mexico during the winter of 1847, see Justin Smith, *The War With Mexico*, 2: 169-70; K. Jack Bauer, *The Mexican War, 1846-1848* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 204; Eric W. Knapp, “‘War Without Pity’ Guerrilla Conflict in the Mexican War” (master’s thesis, University of Nebraska, 1995), 21-22.

the initial chase abated significantly at the arroyo as individual resistance to killing became more pronounced in close quarters. However, the solidarity of the Arkansans had begun to fragment well before this point. One Illinoisan told the commission that the pair of Arkansans he had gone out with “proposed turning back” even before reaching the arroyo “because they said they feared that some of the men were shooting the Mexicans & they did not come out for any such purpose.” Most importantly, however, the group of about twenty Arkansans who rode out to the arroyo represented just a fraction of the nearly 150 men in companies B and G. Whether that fraction would have gone through with an indiscriminate killing is unknowable, but they appear not to have gotten the chance. Upon arrival, Captain Coffey placed his men between the Arkansas volunteers and their targets, diffusing the situation.¹⁵

Having brought along an interpreter, Coffey proceeded to briefly question the Mexicans and inspected their wagons nearby. Several witnesses testified to a similar list of American affects found inside: clothes—which some claimed belonged to a long-missing Illinois volunteer—as well as tools, mess kits, and a carbine sling. Some secondhand accounts later said that the sling belonged to Colquitt and some even claimed that it was marked with his name, but there was no connection noted in the firsthand testimonies. There are innumerable ways, both direct and indirect, through which these items could have found their way into Mexican hands. According to Coffey, the men claimed to have traded for them. Considering the frequent interactions between

¹⁵ Taylor to AG, June 4, 1847. On relationship between physical distance and individual resistance to kill, see Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 1995), 99-140. Grossman’s study observes an engrained psychological resistance to killing in most soldiers. He argues that as physical distance between a soldier and his target decrease, the act of killing becomes more physically, socially, and psychologically difficult.

American soldiers and Mexican civilians, there is little reason to doubt that explanation. Eyewitnesses also stressed the absence of any offensive weapons among the Mexicans' possessions except for a bayonet, a lance, a small smooth bore gun, and some cartridges too large to fit the gun. After their search, Coffey and Lott decided to take the roughly fifty Mexican men to camp as prisoners to prevent any further killing. They escorted these men back and held them until evening, apparently leaving the women and children behind at the arroyo.¹⁶

Several commission witnesses gave fragmentary reports of additional acts of violence occurring as Coffey's and Lott's men left the arroyo. Lieutenant Niles, who arrived as the Illinoisans were starting back with the main group of Mexican men, said that, as he approached, "the firing continued in the mountain before me & apparently at the other side of it." On Coffey's orders, Pvt. James Thompson (2nd Illinois) and another Illinoisan escorted a Mexican man to go and collect his cattle apparently scattered in the fray. Pvt. Thomas Bird (2nd Illinois) watched a single Arkansan follow the three men over the crest of a hill, running to the top in time to see "the smoke from the carbine," but not the shot itself. Private Thompson saw the Arkansan approach the Mexican man holding "a percussion gun cocked with his thumb on the cock. I called to him for Gods sake not to shoot. He said the Mexicans should not stir up the cattle. He then fired & wounded the Mexican." Sgt. George Hodgekiss (2nd Illinois) also saw this attack, claiming he would be able to identify the shooter by sight. However, when the commissioners later asked him to go to the Arkansas camp and point the man out, he

¹⁶ Taylor to AG, June 4, 1847. Lieutenant Niles testified to this last detail. However, beyond noting their presence, the commission witnesses gave no details about the women and children present at the arroyo, not even their number.

refused—hardly a surprising choice, given the volunteer corps' propensity for social violence. Illinoisans loaded the wounded man onto a cart and brought back to camp. Thompson explained that, as they brought the wounded man to the cart, there was another man shot." He gave no further details of this last victim, however, saying only, "I do not know who shot him." Two separate parties returned to the arroyo later that day. Captain Miller and another Illinoisan "made a careful search and found but four all men," and Lt. Col. James Morrison together with Colonel Bissell, neither of whom were present for the killings, found "three dead bodies of Mexican men, lying in a space of three miles."¹⁷

The assembled volunteers trickled back into camp behind Coffey and Lott's party. It was here that different versions of the story began to diverge. The first detail to change was the death toll. While the commission report listed only four confirmed deaths, all other accounts presented a steadily-increasing figure which topped out as high as thirty. Coffey's 1st Lieutenant, Harvey Neville, recorded in his diary a sequence of events identical to that of the commission testimony in all matters but the death toll, which he put at fifteen. Neville was apparently a true eyewitness and his account seems to have been recorded very soon after the incident itself, so the discrepancy is puzzling. Crucially, he did not claim to have actually witnessed these additional killings, but instead used the passive voice, saying, "I do not know, but it is said that some fifteen or twenty of the defenseless wretches were slain on this disgraceful occasion." Neville's phrasing and the placement of this detail after his narrative of events suggest an attempt to square his own recollections with a collective memory already developing in the

¹⁷ Ibid.

American camp. With so much confusion on such a broken and blinkered landscape, how could he be sure he had seen the whole story?¹⁸

Aftermath

The morning of February 11 saw a frenzy of activity at Agua Nueva. Army leadership quickly moved to investigate the incident. The speed with which Brig. Gen. John E. Wool proceeded suggests that dramatic rumors of a massacre began flying as soon as the first men returned, spreading quickly throughout the American camp and beyond. Wool began a flurry of correspondence that morning between himself, General Taylor, and Col. Archibald Yell. Yell replied to Wool's initial query with a letter enclosing a set of signed statements, supposedly the results of personal interviews with several men of his command. Yell identified the specific companies involved—the only Arkansans in camp the previous day—but his subordinates neither acknowledged the killings nor identified the guilty men. They did, however, provide the details of Colquitt's disappearance and death, emphasizing Mexican acts of murder over American. Yell also used this letter to establish his claim to having restricted his men to camp on the tenth, but whether he actually gave this order or merely fabricated it to protect himself is questionable. It is additionally unclear whether Yell and his lieutenants conducted the interviews seriously or honestly. Indeed, one man directly contradicted his written statement while testifying before the commission days later. However, from the end of his own enquiry, Yell maintained that he had done all possible to identify the guilty

¹⁸ Neville, 32.

parties, continuing along with his subordinates to emphasize a history of Mexican attacks against the Arkansans and constructing a narrative of victimization for his unit.¹⁹

Unsatisfied with Yell's response, Wool established his own commission to investigate the killings. The panel, comprising Brig. Gen. Joseph Lane, Col. William Bowles, and Lt. Col. Henry Clay Jr. met later that same day to begin hearing and recording individual statements. Over the next three days the commission heard the testimony of 14 eyewitnesses: eleven men of various ranks from the 2nd Illinois, two privates from the Arkansas Regiment, and a civilian assistant quartermaster. Yell wrote General Taylor later on February 11, condemning the killings and expressing his confidence that the commission would "no doubt...be able to elicit much—more than I possibly could." On the same afternoon, Taylor issued an order bitterly chastising the volunteers for casting "disgrace upon our army and the reputation of our country...If orders and discipline and all the dictates of humanity are set at defiance, it is vain to expect any thing but disaster and defeat." Striking through the promise of socially valuable honor in battle that had brought most volunteers to Mexico in the first place, he admonished, "The Men who cowardly put to death unoffending Mexicans are not those who will sustain the honor or our army in the day of trial."²⁰

As the commission heard testimony, others at Agua Nueva struggled to make sense of the rumors and accounts circulating throughout the camp, constructing early secondhand accounts of the killings. As they did so, the story began to change. While some of these changes were less significant, like the substitution of a cave for an arroyo,

¹⁹ Taylor to AG, June 4, 1847.

²⁰ Ibid.

others show the influence of deeper cultural forces at work. Authors shifted details and added emphasis to particular elements as they rationalized their received knowledge within pre-existing frameworks.

Augustus Ehinger (2nd Illinois) wrote one of the earliest such accounts on February 11. Although his narrative differed little from Harvey Neville's, it contained more clearly defined villains, heroes, and victims as well as significantly higher numbers. Where Neville had described the Arkansans' initial reaction to Colquitt's death in morally ambivalent terms, calling them "greatly exasperated," Ehinger wrote that they "swore bloody revenge." He put the killers' numbers not at twenty, but "two hundred," more men than the entirety of both Arkansan companies in camp at the time. The thirty Mexican victims in Ehinger's account were "defenseless people who begged for mercy on their knees," while his own Illinoian comrades had bravely intervened, "not without danger to themselves."²¹ The following day, Adolph Engelmann (2nd Illinois) offered a similar treatment in a letter describing the killings to his parents. Again inflating the numbers, but also compressing the spatial and narrative distances between cause, effect, intention, and result, he explained, "about one half of the Arkansas Regiment started out 'to reconnoiter' they said but in fact seeking vengeance on a lot of Mexican civilians they had noticed in a narrow valley (or chasm) in the hills near where Colquit's body was found." Upon reaching the arroyo, the Arkansans "at once began to shoot every man they saw in spite of their falling on their knees and begging for their lives." In Engelmann's version, Captain Miller again acted prominently, but had arrived too late to

²¹ Augustus Ehinger diary transcript, 1846-1847, MS 282, Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library, Rice University, 55-56.

prevent a mass killing, “begging them to ‘stop the murder for Gods sake’ without result. When he asked them to wait for the Illinoisans, they stopped, saying, ‘It’s no more than fair to let the footmen have a chance also.’” According to Engelmann, the death toll was “variously placed at from 18 to 30 though it may be more.”²²

Many outside the Illinois regiment constructed their accounts quite differently. On the tenth, Arkansas volunteer John Palmer was camped outside of the town of Palomas, several miles east of Saltillo. Though often critical of the men in his regiment, Palmer described the massacre in one dispassionate sentence. “A scouting party, belonging to our regiment, discovered some Mexicans in a cave near Agua Nueva, and without further parley, fired upon them, killing 17 men and wounding others.” Instead of explicitly passing his own judgment, Palmer paraphrased General Taylor’s condemnation of the killings. Jacob Medart Smith, a private in the Arkansas Mounted Volunteers, Company G, was even more succinct—though probably for different reasons. Emphasizing Colquitt’s death, he wrote, “On the 9th one of Cpt. Danleys men was found dead some mile or two from camp he had been lariated and dragged to death.” Despite being at Agua Nueva that day, Smith made no explicit mention of the killings, writing cryptically, “on the 10th the Mexicans fainted indifferently.” While the precise meaning of this statement may be lost to dead colloquialism, an 1870 entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests a boyish but viciously sardonic tone: “A boy who had ‘killed’

²² If taken literally, this fraction of the Arkansas regiment would have numbered several hundred men; however, since Engelmann wrote originally in German, issues of translation may negate that particular point. Otto B. Engelmann, “The Second Illinois in the Mexican War: Mexican War Letters of Adolph Engelmann, 1846-1847,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 26, no. 4 (January 1934): 439-40.

another at marbles, that is hit his marble' would call out 'Fain it,' meaning 'You mustn't shoot at me in return.'"²³

Within days, word of the killings had begun to travel beyond the U.S. Army. Josiah Gregg, a camp follower closely acquainted with both northern Mexico and the Arkansas regiment, had heard about the killings before his arrival at Agua Nueva on February 13, but received "most of the particulars" at the camp. Likely based on conversations with Arkansas volunteers, Gregg's diary entry on the massacre shifted a number of key details, moving the narrative beyond one of clear heroes, villains, and victims, and foreshadowing the passionate defenses and justifications that appeared in later published accounts. First, the story of Colquitt's death began to more closely resemble the simple lynching that an Arkansas newspaper would later report. After "dragging him a considerable distance," wrote Gregg, Colquitt's attackers left him "dead, and tied up to a palm tree by the neck." Second, Gregg made no mention of the Illinoisans' intervention, writing that the "secret party" responsible for the killings contained Arkansans, as well as Illinoisans and Kentuckians. Most importantly, however, the Mexican camp at the arroyo was now "a neighboring rancho." Despite being "a recently established [one] by the people who had evacuated Agua Nueva, and San Juan de la Vaqueria—they living only in camps," this makeshift village seemed a far less vulnerable target than the wagon-bound refugees described in earlier accounts. It was even complete with its own "acalde," who had reported twelve of his people killed in

²³ John C. Palmer, *Diary of John C. Palmer 1846-1847*, The Huntington Library, February 13, 1847; Jacob Medart Smith, *Diary of Jacob Medart Smith, 1846-1847*, The Hunting Library, February 9-10, 1847; "fain, v.2". OED Online. March 2014. Oxford University Press.

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/67668?rskey=DrZJeh&result=4> (accessed May 13, 2014).

the attack. Gregg closed by calling Taylor's threat of banishing the two Arkansan companies to Carmargo, "decidedly unjust, not only on the innocent in the same companies, but because many Illinois men as well as Kentuckians were as guilty as they."²⁴ Defending his Arkansan friends' dubious record, he insisted, "This was the first serious outrage laid to the charge of the Ark. Vols.; for though some heavy complaints were laid in against them at Patos, these turned out to be virtually false."²⁴

These early secondhand accounts illustrate the role of rumor, culture, and political bias in beginning to diffuse and change narrative accounts of the Agua Nueva massacre. In addition to references in these accounts, at several points in Taylor's collected correspondence, individuals noted or alluded to the boastings of Arkansan men about the number of Mexicans supposedly killed on the tenth. In the absence of other information, authors assumed the worst. Most importantly, the rapid proliferation of increasingly bloody and dramatic accounts suggest that Americans—both in Mexico and on the home front—*expected* to hear tales of indiscriminate massacres. Given the cultural weight of the savage war trope and the prominence of such events as San Jacinto, Goliad, and the Alamo in antebellum historical memory, should such assumptions be surprising?²⁵

On February 14, Wool's commission released its official findings and enclosed a letter to General Taylor in which Wool directly addressed the disparity between the report's official death toll and the more severe rumors circulating throughout the ranks. He explained that by the time his officers reached the site of the massacre to survey the scene, "the living had left, taking with them the bodies of the dead...Hense it would be

²⁴ Josiah Gregg, *Diary & Letters of Josiah Gregg: Excursions in Mexico & California 1847-1850*, ed. Maurice Garland Fulton (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1944), 2:36-37.

²⁵ Taylor to AG, June 4, 1847.

difficult to ascertain how many were killed,” he added suspiciously, “although some of those engaged in the nefarious transaction boasted of killing a much greater number than the commission has reported.” Deeply frustrated, Taylor sent one more letter that day to Archibald Yell, asking the Colonel to turn over the guilty men and threatening to banish both B and G companies to the mouth of the Rio Grande if he failed to do so. Yell’s response was predictable. His reply took a tone of righteous indignation, portraying himself and his regiment as the victims of unfair military leadership and violent Mexican cruelties.²⁶

Four days later, Taylor sent yet another appeal hoping to sway Yell into action. This time it included a translated letter from “The political chief of Saltillo.” That letter, sent to Taylor the previous day by Jefe Político de Saltillo Eduardo Gonzales, implored the commander and his officers to take action. This last attempt only angered Yell. Continuing his narrative of victimization and illustrating his dim and homogenized understanding of Mexican society, Yell bitterly expressed his astonishment that “the political chief made no mention of the delivering up to you such of his soldiers or peons who had murdered three of my regiment in this vicinity...It would seem to me that equal justice would require a delivery on their part as well as ours.” Standing firmly obstinate, Yell concluded, “I have said all, General and done all that’s in my power to relieve the companies from the operations of your order, but in vain.” If we are to believe Arkansan Thomas Jefferson Kelly’s account, Yell may even have been prepared to defend his regiment’s reputation with physical violence. Perhaps it was these tense exchanges that led to the confrontation the following night in Wool’s tent in which Yell nearly took his

²⁶ Taylor to AG, June 4, 1847.

commander's life. The Colonel died at the Battle of Buena Vista, just three days after penning his letter to Taylor.²⁷

On April 2, Taylor at last ordered the two companies to leave. Yell's replacement, Col. John Selden Roane sent a final appeal asking him to rescind the order, citing Mexican offenses as well as the Arkansans' honorable service at Buena Vista. In the end however, it was apparently Wool who interceded for the Arkansans. No written record indicates the reasons behind his recommendation—indeed his previous statements were a highly negative set of comments attached to Roane's letter, repudiating the truth of several of the Colonel's claims. Nevertheless, on April 11, Taylor issued orders rescinding the punishment and ordering the two Arkansas companies to return to General Wool's headquarters. It seems likely that Wool simply could not afford to lose the manpower. The matter, however, was not so quickly put to rest.²⁸

Constructing a Massacre in the Popular Memory

Arkansas volunteer Jonathan Buhoup mustered out of federal service at Carmago, Mexico, on June 20, 1847 together with most other men in his regiment. After marching to Reynosa on the banks of the Rio Grande, they took a riverboat to the port of Brazos on the gulf coast and boarded a steamer to New Orleans, arriving at the Crescent City on July 3. As Buhoup traveled the remaining 2,000 miles to his boyhood

²⁷ Ibid.; Thomas Jefferson Kelly, narrative in possession of Kelly's great-grand-daughter, Mrs. Mary Jane Moore, Bentonville, Arkansas, quoted in William W. Hughes, *Archibald Yell* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1988), 106-7.

²⁸ Taylor to AG, June 4, 1847.

home of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, he crossed through a country of readers clamoring for tales of the war and publishers racing to oblige them. Apparently having laid much of the groundwork for his *Narrative of the Central Division* while still in Mexico, the young veteran was eager to add his voice. Far more than a simple campaign history, Buhoup's book was a carefully constructed and highly political work designed to directly contest his military community's reputation and the popular memory of its campaign. The killings at Agua Nueva formed a crucial part of that memory.²⁹

Public accounts of the massacre began circulating in American newspapers in late March of 1847. The first was a brief but dramatic mention in a page-long update on the war effort published in the Worcester, Massachusetts, *National Aegis* on March 24. The paper had few details to offer, simply passing on reports of "the ruthless massacre of a party of Mexicans in the presence of their wives and children by a detachment of these volunteers." But a short supply of facts did not preclude speculation or spin. "What effect must the sight of those widows and orphans have exerted upon the hosts of Santa Anna!" feared the *Aegis*'s editors. In their view, the discipline and honor of the volunteers and the military success of the army were mutually dependent. A massacre of Mexican civilians would prove that "[the volunteers] are distinguished by no such discipline as would be requisite for an orderly and successful retreat in the face of an advancing foe." Were such poor soldiers to "fall into the power of the enemy, their fate will be terrible." The editors concluded ominously, "While there is a hope that the

²⁹ Buhoup, 148-49; John W. Jordan, *A Century and a Half of Pittsburgh and Her People* (New York: Lewis, 1908), 76.

accounts may be exaggerated, we cannot repress an apprehension that a harrowing tale of disaster is in store for the American people.”³⁰

Two days later, the *Arkansas State Democrat*, based in Company B’s home town of Little Rock, published a more detailed report and defense of the killings. Supposedly informed by a February 14 letter from an officer in John Palmer’s company, this story focused not on the massacre, but on the murder that provoked it. Recasting the attack in more familiar terms, it explained that a soldier of Company B “by the name of *McCallaster*, from Clark county”—a misidentified Samuel Colquitt—“had been found hung a few days previous, with a *lasso* around his neck.” After searching for several days, a party of Arkansans found his body not merely dead, but demeaned, “stripped of his clothing and appear[ing] to have been dead 2 or 3 days.” Near the body, they found a cave filled with “over 100 *peons* (laborers), who they were satisfied were the murderers of their comrade.” For the *Democrat*, the volunteer community’s certainty was sufficient to justify their subsequent actions. “Burning with rage at the unprovoked and cold-blooded murder, the party in a moment of excitement, fell upon the cowardly wretches, and killed some 27 or 30 of them.” The diction here mattered. Whereas Colquitt’s attackers had been “murderers,” the Arkansans were merely killers—labels with very different moral connotations. As in later accounts, the preferred strategy for the Arkansans’ defenders was not to deny the killings or dispute the rising death toll, but to undermine Mexican innocence. To the *Democrat*, the killings seemed to fit comfortably

³⁰ “Important from the Army,” *National Aegis* (Worchester, MA), March 24, 1847.

within the socially normal bounds of vigilante justice; the volunteers may have acted hastily, but not wrongly.³¹

Perhaps the most influential contemporary account of the massacre, supposedly written on February 13 or 14 by an imbedded war correspondent to the *St. Louis Republican*, first appeared near the end of March and was reprinted in papers throughout the country that spring, with abridged versions appearing in books and pamphlets on the war by mid-summer.³² Newspapers—usually Whig, anti-war, or abolitionist—printed this sensationaly-written letter under headlines like “Horrible Massacre—Butchery of Mexicans,” “American Atrocities,” and “Direful Vengeance.”³³ The original author was similarly clear about the massacre’s meaning. “Some of the most unfortunate events have transpired in our column lately,” he began, certain that the killings would “arouse the vengeance of the ‘pisanos’ in this country against our troops, and will furnish the disaffected at home with new food for vituperation against the war.” Further simplifying the core details of the killings, he explained that, upon discovering the “horrible sight” of Colquitt’s body, “the Arkansas men vowed vengeance deep and sure.” The following morning, “some thirty” of them rode to the arroyo and “commenced an indiscriminate and bloody massacre of the poor creatures.” The author claimed to have just missed “the

³¹ “An Arkansan Volunteer Hung by Mexicans,” *Arkansas State Democrat* (Little Rock, AR), March 26, 1847.

³² For book and pamphlet re-printings, see G. N. Allen, *Mexican Treacheries and Cruelties, Incidents and Sufferings in the Mexican war, with Accounts of Hardships Endured, Treacheries of the Mexicans, Battles Fought, and Success of American arms, Also, an Account of Valiant Soldiers Fallen, and the Particulars* (Boston and New York: Np, 1847); J.M. Wynkoop, *Anecdotes and Incidents: Comprising Daring Exploits, Personal and Amusing Adventures of the Officers and Privates of the Army, and Thrilling Incidents of the Mexican War* (Pittsburgh: N.P., 1848), 91-92.

³³ “Horrible Massacre—Butchery of Mexicans,” *Albany Evening Journal* (Albany, NY), April 8 1847; “American Atrocities,” *The Liberator* (Boston, MA), April 16, 1847; “Direful Vengeance,” *Daily Sentinel and Gazette* (Milwaukee, WI), April 23, 1847.

work of death” and gave no details of the scene, simply calling it, “horrible.” As for the death toll, “God knows how many of the unarmed peasantry have been sacrificed to atone for the blood of poor Colquitt,” he said. “The Arkansas regiment say not less than thirty have been killed. I think, however at least twenty of them have been sent to their eternal rest.”³⁴

Despite its clear condemnation of the killings, the letter worked both to demonize the Arkansans as well as to rationalize—though not excuse—their actions. It began by stressing a long history of Mexican violence, with “occasional murders of our men...perpetrated ever since we have been in the country—all killed by the lasso.” The Arkansans had been “particularly exposed to this guerrilla warfare” due to their frequent assignments as scouts and at remote outposts, having “lost four or five of their men.” Similarly, Colquitt was not just any private, but “a nephew of the Senator,” a valuable young victim killed needlessly at the hands of marginal men in the course of an unjust war.³⁵

The second half of the letter featured a strange and probably fictional account soaked in the same embellished melodrama and racist representation that permeated an entire genre of antebellum Latin American travel literature.³⁶ Complete with bits of elementary Spanish dialogue, it recounted the author’s discovery of a group of Mexican women and children “wholly ignorant of what had been going on” and anxious to find

³⁴ “Murder of Mexicans,” *Commercial Advertiser* (New York, NY), April 7, 1847.

³⁵ This claim, presumably referring to Sen. Walter T. Colquitt of Georgia appears in several accounts, but its veracity is unclear. The association may have developed as Samuel Colquitt became an idealized victim both in the collective memory of the volunteer corps and in written accounts. *Ibid.*

³⁶ See Amy Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 91. Such literature generally presented Latin America as a region of weak men and sexually available women.

their missing husbands and fathers. The author led an old woman and two young boys to the bodies of two dead Mexican men. Upon seeing the first, the woman lamented, “*a donde estan los otros, madre de Dios, adonde iremos?*—where are the others? Mother of God, where shall we go?” One of the boys seemed to recognize the second body. “The heaving of his manly little chest and the silent tears stealing from his dark eyes, and rolling their scorching way down his cheeks, told too eloquently that the little fellow had lost a friend.” The author asked him “in the most soothing voice I could command, ‘do you know that man?’ To which he replied, ‘Es mi padre, cavallero.’” He “turned away from us, drew his sleeve across his eyes, and without an audible sob or murmur returned to the glen, where his mother, brother, and sisters were to hear the tale of their desolation.”³⁷

This starkly gendered presentation of the Mexican survivors—only wailing old women and orphaned young boys—effeminated Mexico, portraying its people as the helpless victims of masculine American cruelty. The treatment both helped to further rationalize the violence and fed into the author’s subtle anti-war message. He offered harsh condemnations of the massacre throughout, grounded in similarly racialized conceptions of Mexico. “Let us no longer complain of Mexican barbarity—poor, degraded, ‘priest ridden’ as she is. No act of inhumane cruelty, perpetrated by her most desperate robbers can excel the work of yesterday, committed by our soldiery.” Responsibility, however, did not fall solely upon the Arkansans; the government was complicit as well. “No earthly power now exists to punish the perpetrators of this outrage,” the author fumed. “Congress, in its wisdom, has refused to sanction executions

³⁷ “Murder of Mexicans,” *Commercial Advertiser* (New York, NY), April 7, 1847.

in the field for the murders committed here, and all that can be done is to send the perpetrators back with disgrace.”³⁸

By the time Jonathan Buhoup submitted his manuscript, this and other dramatic and condemning accounts of the Agua Nueva massacre had circulated throughout the country, appearing in newspapers as far flung as St. Louis, Milwaukee, Baltimore, and Boston, as well as in more permanent books and pamphlets. Buhoup took these accounts head on, apparently calling out the *Republican*’s correspondent directly. “Certain newspaper correspondents have commented on rather freely,” he wrote. “So much has already been said about it that is not true, that we feel ourselves bound to refute some of the base slanders and lies in relation to it.” Abandoning the playful narrative tone that he had used to describe collective social violence in the ranks, Buhoup’s description of the massacre was perfectly serious. He made no use of the Indian, nor the colorful frontier dialect so carefully employed elsewhere to soften the edges of his community’s violence. He was certain, “when the public have read the facts, just as they were, they will be inclined to think that those men who committed the tragedy were justifiable.” Carefully assuring his readers in a curious collective voice that, “being a member of the same regiment, we would not have our readers think that we are partial,” he promised, “the naked facts as they occurred.” Although Buhoup himself was in fact miles away from Agua Nueva at the time, he was confident that “the statement we are about to make may be depended on as correct.”³⁹

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Buhoup, 106.

Buhoup constructed a justifying narrative of victimization centered on a particularly gruesome description of Colquitt's death. Slowly building tension, he explained that, after the young private had left camp to train his horse, "It was noticed that he did not return at dark and fears began to be entertained for his safety." When morning arrived with still no sign, it "became the general belief that he had been *lariated*." After one failed search by the Arkansans, a Kentucky volunteer happened upon Colquitt's body and led them to "their comrade, who had fallen a victim to the brutality of some murderous ranchero." Buhoup vividly described the body; "A *lariat* was around his neck, sunken or partially covered in the flesh." Colquitt's assailants appeared to have "dragged [him] about three hundred yards, over stones and prickly pears." Worse yet, "he could not have been quite dead" when they left him, "for one of his hands was in a position which showed that he had tried to disengage his neck from the rope." Closing the description, with subtly racialized imagery, Buhoup exclaimed, "It was horrible! There sat the most awful looking object that the imagination could picture. He was perfectly black, and his body bruised and mangled in the most shocking manner." This cruel inversion of the racial status quo "was enough to raise feelings of revenge and resentment in the breast of any one who had the least feeling and sympathy for his fellow countryman."⁴⁰

Buhoup continued this narrative of victimization into his description of the killings themselves. A group from companies B and G "started off, undoubtedly with the intention of meteing out a sanguinary retribution on those blood-thirsty miscreants of the *lariat*." Although he noted that the officers were unaware of this outing at the time,

⁴⁰ Ibid., 107.

Buhoup implied a broad sanction of the group's activities. "We were on duty at the time, and could not accompany them," he explained, "Otherwise we might also have been of the party." Foregoing the violent chase described in earlier accounts, Buhoup explained that the Arkansans "proceeded up into the gap of a mountain where Mexicans had been seen" and found "some rancheros, living in small huts, but nothing like a rancho appeared." These were not the refugee families described in earlier accounts; only men were present at Buhoup's arroyo, and there appeared no clear reason for their presence. Pulling together disparate threads visible in several earlier accounts, Buhoup constructed clear proof of the Mexican men's guilt. Upon searching the huts of these marginal men, one Arkansan found "the identical carbine sling belonging to the murdered man. They knew it from the fact of its having his name on it." Having gathered all of the men together, an Arkansan who spoke Spanish asked them "how they came by the sling, but they gave no satisfactory answer."⁴¹

The killing began suddenly, anonymously, as if by accident. "At this moment one of the men shot a Mexican," Buhoup wrote. "Firing now commenced in good earnest, and in rapid succession." General Wool heard the shots and dispatched a company of 1st Illinois volunteers to investigate. The Illinoisan party found "between twenty-five and thirty dead Mexicans—men, and not *women and children*, as some trifling correspondents thought to shed a refulgent lustre on the production of their pens by stating. As to women and children, there were none present." Bypassing the agency of the despised Wool, Buhoup explained that General Taylor organized a "court of inquiry," but could not identify the killers. In a last attempt, "He sent word to the officers that if

⁴¹ Ibid., 108.

they did not give up the offenders,” they would be punished collectively and banished to the mouth of the Rio Grande. However, such cooperation proved impossible, “for they knew not the real party.” However, Buhoup believed “that if they had known them, they would have been willing to suffer alike with the men.” His volunteer community embraced and sanctioned the acts of its members; “[The officers] were impressed with the idea, like ourselves, that any one who had seen the murdered man, and could not feel himself inspired with the feelings of revenge, was not the man qualified to be in Mexico. Here the affair rested.”⁴²

Buhoup was not alone in feeling the need to publicly justify the Arkansan’s actions at Agua Nueva. The following year, Indiana volunteer Isaac Smith published a similar campaign history aimed at defending the reputation of his volunteer community. “In case of a disaster all the evil consequences are charged upon the soldiery,” he averred in his preface, “the cloud of calumny throws its dense mist around their fair fame, diverting the public mind from the more culpable of high rank.” Smith insisted, “all disasters that seem to tarnish the reputation of our troops may be traced to causes for which they are not responsible.” Although “individuals may bring dishonor upon American arms,” he conceded, “a great majority of the troops composing every corps are brave.” Isolated wrongs could not ruin the honor of a military community as easily as the *Aegis*’s editors believed. Especially in the flood of harrowing accounts describing Winfield Scott’s triumphant capture of Mexico City, Smith’s community was compelled to defend its own service. “We must insist that *justice is still due to those who fought at Buena Vista*. Indiana has made too many valuable sacrifices in the Mexican war to suffer

⁴² Ibid., 108-109

her reputation to fall without an effort to save it.” He closed his preface by threatening, “a strict retribution awaits those who, knowing the facts, refuse to award justice to such as have suffered through the incompetency of officers.”⁴³

Smith constructed an account of the Agua Nueva massacre that left no doubt as to the guilt of the Arkansans’ victims. After discovering Colquitt’s body dead, lassoed, and stripped, they again came under attack. “The next day, a few hostile Mexicans were seen approaching a soldier evidently for the same purpose, but fortunately other American soldiers being near the spot, advanced towards their adversaries.” The Mexicans “fled and took refuge in a cave at the Ojo de Agua de Catana.” The Arkansans tracked down the “desperadoes,” and “after searching the apartment, they found the clothes, belt, sabre and scabbard of the soldier who was lassoed, besides many other American articles.” As in Buhoup’s account, the men could offer no explanation. Like William Mills twelve years earlier, Smith systematically undermined any potential mark of legitimacy, branding the Mexicans as marginal—and by extension, dangerous and disposable—men. “Everything went to confirm the guilt of the Mexicans—they were occupying a cave, and had no flocks to watch—no fields to cultivate—and in short, no honest employment to attract their attention to that position.” He believed, “The circumstantial evidence of their guilt was too plain to be misunderstood.”⁴⁴

The Arkansans proceeded to mete out a punishment in the style of antebellum lynch law. “Being determined to avenge the blood of their esteemed companion,” they “shot down about twenty-five of the band.” However, “others who begged for their lives

⁴³ Isaac Smith, *Reminiscences of a Campaign in Mexico*, 3-4

⁴⁴ Ibid., 43.

were taken prisoners and brought back to camp.” Smith argued that their actions had been “greatly exaggerated in certain quarters,” especially by those who had “asserted with apparent sincerity, that the Arkansas cavalry murdered peaceable citizens and women and children.” This had not been the case; “to admit that this band of Mexicans were peaceable citizens would be to discard all evidence.” In Smith’s account, the killings at Agua Nueva had been a socially legitimate act of vigilante justice. Indeed, the Arkansans had done a public service: “The routing of this band of robbers no doubt saved the lives of some Americans as well as of many peaceable Mexicans.”⁴⁵

The final primary source account of the massacre would not appear for another decade. In his melodramatic and lavishly illustrated memoir, regular army veteran Samuel Chamberlain presented the killings at Agua Nueva not as an act of vigilante violence, but as something more closely resembling a frontier Indian massacre. His largely fictionalized story of the “Massacre of the Cave” blended the Agua Nueva massacre with the standard elements of Richard Slotkin’s “savage war” trope.⁴⁶ Chamberlain placed himself and his unit—both absent from the actual event—at the center of his narrative and told of the Arkansans “yelling like fiends” and scalping each of their victims around a campfire, “while on the rocky floor lay over twenty Mexicans dead and dying in pools of blood.” He went on to vividly describe women and children “clinging to the knees of the murderers and shrieking for mercy” as well as “A rough crucifix...fastened to a rock,” which “some irreverent wretch had crowned...with a

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ See Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization 1800-1890* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), 60-61.

bloody scalp.” After bravely halting the massacre, Chamberlain and his comrades met with a grotesquely caricatured Arkansas volunteer.

A brutal looking Rackensacker advanced towards us brandishing a huge knife dripping with gore in one hand, and a bunch of reeking scalps in the other, and cried out: ‘H’yer you Regulars! I’m Bill Stamps, I’m! We don’t a muss with you, we don’t! I raised this ‘ere *har* from the d—d yellow bellies that had on poor Archy’s clothes. I did! Take me to ‘Old Fussy’ [General Wool] and I’ll be responsible for the whole. With this, the savage cutthroat marched out with a swagger, gave a fancy Indian dance and subsided in tears.

Chamberlain painted “Bill Stamps” as a broken and racially blurred personification of American frontier violence—the quintessential white Indian. For Chamberlain, Agua Nueva was an extension of the larger history of racial massacres in the American West. In his story, war with a racial inferior had undermined not just the Arkansans’ civilized natures, but their whiteness as well.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Chamberlain’s story was the last contemporary account of the Agua Nueva Massacre. The dramatic changes visible in various retellings over the course of the preceding decade show the powerful influence of culture and politics in creating, contesting, and re-shaping both the collective and popular memories of non-sanctioned violence. The story gradually shifted as individuals and groups struggled to rationalize, understand, and relate the killings within preexisting schemas of violence, with Chamberlain finally incorporating the story almost seamlessly into the myth of the frontier. Nor was the massacre a static entity for eyewitnesses either. As Harvey

⁴⁷ Chamberlain, 86-88.

Neville's diary entry suggests, collective memory held powerful influence, as individuals sought to square their own recollections with those of others around them and piece together coherent narratives from disparate individual memories. For most later authors, the popular memory of the massacre held important political implications, and they carefully constructed their narratives with those stakes in mind. However, despite the bitter contest over the truth and significance of the massacre in the public sphere, the historical memory of the Agua Nueva massacre effectively vanished by the outbreak of the Civil War. Along with Chamberlain's memoirs, it would lay dormant for nearly a century.

CHAPTER V

CODA

The rapid multiplication of disparate stories in the days, weeks, months, and years following February 10, 1847 demonstrates that a clear understanding of non-sanctioned violence in the U.S.-Mexican War may be more difficult than previous scholars have imagined. A number of important factors confound any cursory attempt to study it. The most obvious of these are the impact of rumor and the formation of collective memory both among soldiers in Mexico and through the anti-war press. Firsthand accounts were rare, and secondhand accounts carried significant distortions and heavy cultural baggage. The organization of the army itself presents historians with further difficulties, just as it kept Wool's commissioners from identifying the guilty men. Volunteer units constructed strong collective identities, often defending their members and reputations with violence. Their solidarity combined potently with their animosity towards both the regular army and the Mexican population, obscuring the truth and sheltering the perpetrators of non-sanctioned violence. However, race and racism further complicated this process. In addition to forcing the matters of motive and meaning beyond simple retaliation, a consideration of race raises many questions. Would American volunteers have responded differently to violence from whites? Would they have told their stories differently? How

would the press and people on the home front have reacted? Allusions and tropes visible in late secondhand accounts suggest that race was inseparable from American understandings of the Agua Nueva massacre. Those accounts gradually worked to situate the killings within the myth of the frontier, divesting them of their original context in favor of broader systems of meaning heavy with racism.

Perhaps most important, however, is a conspicuous silence. In English language accounts of the massacre, Mexican voices speak only through the recollections and imaginations of Anglo-Americans. This was true even in the firsthand commission testimony. When Captain Coffey recounted his questioning of the survivors at the arroyo, he paraphrased, presenting only the information he gleaned from them. Despite the fact that these people remained in the American camp for several hours, no one apparently thought it prudent to question them about the day's events. Who were the people camped in the mountains, and where did they go from there? American writers showed little concern for their origin or identity, calling them simply, "peons," "peasantry," or "the Mexicans." This disregard and dehumanization relegated these people to the role of voiceless victims both in narrative accounts and in the Army's official records, a pattern which this essay and all previous scholarship on non-sanctioned violence have perpetuated.¹

Eduardo Gonzales's February 17 letter to Zachary Taylor unknowingly hinted at another important and unanswered question raised by the killings. He mentioned the survivors of the massacre "having fled to places unknown." How did ordinary people in northern Mexico respond to the violence of American volunteers? There is significant

¹ Taylor to AG, June 4, 1847; *Niles' National Register*, LXXII (April 10, 1847), 89.

evidence in U.S. soldiers' accounts that a massive exodus of civilians took place in response to the invasion of Coahuila. Gonzales's letter offers further evidence of this. He hinted at the existence of a refugee crisis in northern Mexico during the war—a crisis forming just one part of a virtually unexplored Mexican wartime experience in the North.² Like the complex story of the Agua Nueva massacre, this historiographical gap further reveals the chronically understudied nature of the U.S.-Mexican War and especially calls attention to the need for a more substantial consideration of Mexican sources. Many such sources sit well within the reach of U.S. historians. In particular, the records of the Adjutant General of the Army at the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington D.C. preserve a wealth of Mexican voices both in Spanish and English language documents, including letters, reports, and court proceedings. While twentieth-century military historians briefly considered several of these, they remain untouched by social and cultural history methodology. Although this study has attempted to apply those insights to Anglo-American accounts of the war, it tells only one half of an already narrow story.

With the growing importance of the Southwest borderlands in contemporary U.S. society and politics, it is no longer possible to segregate the U.S.-Mexican War from broader historical narratives. The U.S. invasion represented the first significant cultural interaction between the two nations. While the borderlands had been a fluid contact zone for centuries prior, the war forced large groups of people from the cores of Mexico and the United States to interact with each other, not just as abstractions, but face to face. While that exchange entailed far more than just violence, its general tone foreshadowed

² Taylor to AG, June 4, 1847.

the following century and a half of contentious history. However, to what extent the violence of American volunteers during the occupation directly fed into later animosity and violence in the borderlands remains unclear. Answering that question requires more comprehensive and truly trans-national scholarship on the war and the cultural exchange it brought.

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